

THE FREETHINKER

EDITED BY CHAPMAN COHEN

Vol. LXII.—No 24

Sunday, June 14, 1942

Price Threepence

CONTENTS

Views and Opinions—The Editor...	242
A Tasty Tale—F. J. Corina	243
Acid Drops	243
To Correspondents	245
Sugar Plums	245
National Secular Society: Annual Conference...	246
New Attitude in Religious Thought—Maud Simon	247
Sunday Lecture Notices, Etc.	248

VIEWS AND OPINIONS

What is Blasphemy?

CANDIDLY, I do not know with absolute certainty; for it has meant anything and everything to which the reigning priesthood cared to attach it. At first glance it might seem that "to speak disrespectfully of God" would fill the bill. But there are difficulties in the way of accepting that definition. It would make blasphemy very largely depend upon the geographical accident of where one happened to be born; for there are all sorts of gods—black, brown, white and yellow. In a non-Christian country one might speak just as one pleases of the Christian god; but one might very easily get into trouble with the local deity by using careless language.

Dictionaries are not decisive on the matter. One definition is "to insult or speak disrespectfully of God." But how can one insult what one believes does not exist? One cannot insult a vacuum. It would seem reasonable to assume that before a man can insult a god he must believe there is a god to be insulted. One might speak disrespectfully of the Equator, but not before the figure of the Equator was in existence. An English citizen might be accused of speaking disrespectfully of George VI., but not of the King of Norway. The thing that is blasphemed and the person who blasphemes must have a local habitation. A Christian may blaspheme the Christian god, but not the Mohammedan deity. When the Christian charges the Atheist with blasphemy he is complaining that the man who does not believe in the existence of god is acting as though that god did not exist. In what other way could he act? The one man who cannot commit genuine blasphemy is an Atheist.

The element of time also comes into the question. It was once blasphemy to disbelieve in the literal inspiration of the Bible. To believe in it nowadays is almost to qualify for a lengthy residence in an asylum for the mentally deficient. The Roman Church would consider it blasphemy for one to say that the amatory ecstasies displayed by female saints in which visions of Jesus occurred had their formative origin in a starved sexual nature. A Protestant Alienist would regard it as a sound scientific generalisation. To-day, our judges have whittled down the common law of blasphemy to the level of creating a brawl in the public highway. The ruling is that one may write or speak in whatever way one chooses of the saints,

of Jesus, of the Bible, of God, provided such language is not calculated to cause certain citizens to create a breach of the peace.

I sat in a court some years back and heard one of our most pious judges rule that the standard for determining blasphemy was not the probable effect of what was said on level-headed, educated, reasoning men, but the ordinary uneducated, impulsive man of the streets. It is the rule of the best by the worst; the sanctification of the unthinking by the more educated members of society.

God as Guide

Finally, there is in the Christian Bible God's own definition of blasphemy. It is, by the way, a terrible warning to missionaries—that blasphemous crowd which go about interfering with the gods of other people. The way to treat those who try to introduce strange gods into the community will be found in Deuteronomy xiii. :—

"If there arise among you a prophet . . . saying, Let us go after other gods. . . . If thy brother or thy son, or thy daughter, or the wife of thy bosom, or thy friend entice thee, saying, Let us go and serve other gods . . . thou shalt not consent unto him, neither shalt thine eye pity him, neither shalt thou spare, neither shalt thou conceal him. But thou shalt surely kill him, thine hand shall be the first upon him. And thou shalt stone him with stones, that he die."

That, as I have said, is an awful warning to missionaries who go round saying unto the natives, "Thy god is rubbish. Lo! he is powerless, and his priests live on the fat of the land. Thy god is born of fear and ignorance. Cease thou to believe in him; cast out from thy midst his priests. Follow us; believe in our god and all shall be well with you." Luckily for these missionaries, the natives do not read the Bible before they are converted. And when they are thoroughly converted their sense of the ridiculous has become too anæmic seriously to affect the missionaries.

So I really do not know how to define "blasphemy" in itself. And if I were being prosecuted for blasphemy, to the official question, "Do you plead Guilty or Not Guilty?" I should have to reply, "I really do not know. Neither does his Lordship the judge know. For both of us it depends upon what conclusion the jury comes to. If the twelve striking samples of British wisdom are of a very well educated, intelligent type, I can imagine them arguing when they retire, 'How can a man commit blasphemy against something he does not believe exists? In any case, I don't think God is going to be upset by anything the accused man can say, particularly if it is said in good faith. We will vote for acquittal.'"

But if the jury is made up of the mentally ill-developed, ill-tempered, ill-balanced class that Lord Phillimore assumed to require a law against blasphemy to prevent

their creating a breach of the peace, then I am afraid the jury will find me Guilty. The poor mutts will know no better. A law against blasphemy is one of the craziest laws that ever appeared upon the Statute Book of any country. These law-makers take god under their protection as a mother hen gathers a scared chicken under its wing. It makes one wonder which is the most ridiculous: the god who needs a police force to protect him or god's followers who provide a police force to prevent Atheists robbing god of his status. But in passing it may be noticed that a majority in both Houses of Parliament still hold that a blasphemy law is necessary. They belong to the first category mentioned by Lord Phillimore—at least, so far as protecting God is concerned.

The Worst of All Blasphemies

But I have been straying from the straight and narrow path that keeps directly to the matter in hand, and which often sends the reader to sleep before he has made contact with it for long. I was really led to consider the question of blasphemy by a single sentence by the Bishop of Bradford. It appeared in the "Bradford Telegraph" for May 24. Here it is, short and sharp, if not exactly sweet:—

"The worst form of blasphemy is shoddy work."

That struck me as original and daring. Intended as a rebuke to those people who might not be working as hard as they could for the promotion of the war, it covered the whole field of effort, human and divine—particularly the divine. For "shoddy" stands for something that pretends to be perfect but is imperfect: work that claims to be what it is not; to do something that one is not capable of doing. What had the Bishop in mind when, on the day that is set aside for the worship of God and in a building devoted to God, he made such a gigantic attack on God's handiwork.

Consider a few facts. God made the world, and when he had finished the job he looked round and found it not merely good but "very good." Then he made man, and he was included in the "very good." Then he made woman, and, with prophetic insight, he did not place her in the category of the "very good." He made her for the benefit of man—and let the rest go without comment. He also made the inhabitants of heaven. The angels appear to have been good also; but they ought to have been good because they were free from hereditary dangers. They were without ancestors and minus progeny. But there was one piece of shoddy work even here, for one of God's creation turned rebel, caused an uproar in heaven and was ultimately not destroyed, but packed off to hell with a number of his followers, where he established a kingdom of his own. Lucifer was, from the divine point of view, certainly a piece of "shoddy work"—in other words, an exhibition of the worst form of blasphemy.

The man and the woman God had created also turned out to be shoddy. Their descendants likewise behaved in a "shoddy" way. The longer the human race existed the worse they became, until in sheer desperation God determined to drown all humans, with the exception of a single family, and so make a fresh start. But shoddy will betray itself, as murder will out. The new race was no better than the old one. God had planned the human race for his glory; the devil gained the majority as recruits and ultimately gathered round him in hell most of the finest representatives of the human stock. Like a primitive

Quisling, Satan established his agents well within God's territory. They had been created for the "greater glory of God," but they for the most part paid allegiance to Satan. More blasphemy in the shape of God's shoddy work.

A Last Effort

The whole divinely planned structure seemed to be near collapse. The situation called for a desperate remedy. God himself could not come to earth to argue with his enemies. That would be undignified. A king acts through his Ministers; a God acts through his deputies. God's only son, who appears to have been kept in the background up to then, was sent to earth to save mankind. The price of that salvation was his own ignominious death. Probably it was thought that such a death by such a person would awaken all that was decent in human nature.

But once more the plan proved to be of a "shoddy" character. It turned out to be as effective as smoothing the shell of a tortoise would be to make the animal smile. The records of this heavenly plan were so badly kept that some have doubted whether it ever really happened. Moreover, the shoddy nature of the plan was almost demonstrated by the fact that this plan of salvation had been tried by other gods without being crowned with success. If ever blasphemy was to use the application of the term by the Bishop of Bradford, it was plainly here. The only one who appears to have reaped profit from the plan was the original angel who led the insurrection in heaven. Not merely did the majority of the human race ignore the scheme, but while the road to hell became crowded with visitors the road to heaven was more vacant than ever. That path became as barren as a London street since the petrol allowance was cut to its lowest point. The inhabitants of hell mustered some of the finest specimens of the human race; the chief residents in heaven were those who on earth had loudly proclaimed their own unworthiness—and whose life often justified the self-condemnation.

So the story of God's plan runs. His children, instead of loving one another, spend a large part of their lives in devising plans for blasting each other out of existence with high explosives. Clearly, the work of developing a race of men who should be the best on earth has failed. It is true that Mr. Duff Cooper assures the world that "we"—Mr. Duff Cooper is one of the "we's"—are the finest race that has ever lived on earth; but very many of those who have been counted as very fine characters—irrespective of nationality—are spending eternity with Satan instead of with God. It is a "shoddy" job.

The only question that remains is, "Can God commit blasphemy against himself?" If he cannot, then the Bishop of Bradford is wrong in saying that "shoddy" is the worst form of blasphemy. I would like to see this rather knotty question settled; and, if the B.B.C. took it in hand, I am sure that Commander Campbell would have had some experience during his travels in South America bearing on this subject. A God who not only brought everything into existence, but who gave everything the qualities they manifest should have turned out a better job than this world has shown itself to be. But Jahveh is the first god who has been charged by one of his own representatives with blasphemy. But perhaps the Bishop has mixed his metaphors. Let us hope he has— for some of the world's best have been blasphemers.

CHAPMAN COHEN.

A "TASTY" TALE

Tell me the old, old story—
Poor Jesus hasn't been tried.

WHEN will our clerical big shots have enough sense to realise that the public are sick to death of that lame tale, "Christianity has not failed—it has never been tried"? Even the dumbest brain in Britain must realise, in the presence of thousands of churches, thousands of parsons, millions of Bibles, hymn books and other religious haberdashery, that the failure of Christianity is in no way due to the need for being tried.

The latest cleric to chant this piece of falsified foolishness is none other than the grand Radio Padre of All Britain, the Rev. Ronald Selby Wright, Chaplain to the Forces.

The Radio Padre, however, has the distinction of giving to the cliché a literally new flavour by presenting the religion of Christ as an edible dish—something to be "tasted." In a recent broadcast he suggested we could not know whether Christianity was good or not unless we had tasted it. The only way to get to know what Christianity was, was to taste it, and it was not fair to reject it without tasting.

That may be so, of course. Some men may be so constructed that they lack certain faculties, and have to taste even poison before they can identify it. Other men are like our Persian cat—they can sniff at a thing and make up their minds at once whether it is good or bad for them. This saves the trouble of spitting it out later. But even then, there's no accounting for tastes, as the old saw says.

Seriously, however, one does get tired of hearing, from men who not only ought to know better, but really must know better, that "Christianity has never been tried." Does the Radio Padre seriously believe that statement? Can he believe it, in face of the fact that there is (statistically) a parson and a bit for every thousand people in this country, plus lay assistants; in face of the fact that almost every British child has an average of ten years' schooling during which religious instruction is given every day; in face of the fact that churches rival public houses in plentifulness; and when we consider that "swearing by Almighty God" accompanies almost every legal and administrative act of the citizen?

Heavens above! We don't have to *taste* Christianity in this country. They start by splashing it over us at the christening; making us sing and chant about it in the infant class; pushing it down our throats in more solid chunks in the senior classes; cajoling us with it through "youth movements" in adolescence. Even then, eight out of ten of us manage to pull through without being worse than slightly hypnotised when we reach the adult stage. So they come at us again when we want to be married, this time with the beautiful blackmail of their doctrine of "marriages made in heaven," though actually they don't possess the legal qualifications, as religious institutions, to marry a goose and a gander, let alone human beings.

Surviving that ordeal, and still preferring a ramble on a Sunday to the musty "taste" of a church, we are chased out into the country by peregrinating parsons who are determined to preach the hostel-gospel. Even the hiker must learn about his Miker. Or, formerly, motoring into the restfulness of some country village, or seaside town, we were even there pursued by white apparitions among the road and street signs:—

"TO THE METHODIST CHURCH"

"TO THE PARISH CHURCH"

and so on. Travelling showmen have nothing on the Churches when it comes to billing the performance.

Now the petrol tap has been turned off, and the citizen of forty-plus must stay at home. Home! The word has a new meaning these travel-less days. Leisure, rest, peace. Out of the reach of meddling ministers and their miserable monotones. But good God! What's that? They've got us again!

The morning service, the morning talk; the afternoon service, the afternoon talk; the service for children, the service in Welsh; the evening service, the evening talk; the epilogue, the prologue, the monologue, the dialogue; the Old Testament, the New Testament; this saint, that saint; the Bishop of this, the Vicar of that. B.B.C., B.B.C., B.B.C. That's it. Big Boost for Christianity. Mahomet and the Mountain! They can't get Henry Dubb to church, so they've brought the church to Henry Dubb.

An Englishman's home was his castle—now it is a church. Morning, noon and night. Well might these parsons claim that no quarrel exists between religion and science, for has not science enabled them to survive the obsolescence of their empty churches by putting a church in every home; and without so much as "if you please" to the owners of those homes?

And so they pursue us, from the schoolroom to the home, from the cradle into middle life, and unrelentingly on into old age, bewildering and wearying us with their bickerings and follies.

Three hundred labels on the same jar of jam!

Finally comes the peace that passeth *their* understanding. But the man in black, with the doleful voice, is still there, his dirge disturbing even death.

Did you say *taste*, Radio Padre? We have not only tasted Christianity; we have been saturated with it. But you'll have to try again, brother. It's more than a question of tasting. It's more than a question of empty churches. It's a question of an empty creed.

F. J. CORINA.

ACID DROPS

THE Church has always called an idea immoral if it happened to be dangerous. But every idea that is worthy of serious consideration is dangerous to something. Consider what a dangerous idea was, and is, Darwinian Natural Selection. When announced, it fell on the world with a force greater than any known explosive. Present-day big guns and land mines were mere toys at the side of it. It crashed into all sorts of established theories of morals, of sociology, and particularly of theology. It reverberated over the whole of the globe, and its power developed with the passing of the years. The truth is that which everyone accepts, which rouses no antagonisms, upsets nothing and disturbs no one, is properly labelled a platitude. It carries with it no winged message of revolt against what is. It carries no useful and inspiring promise of what may be. The greatest of lies tend to wear themselves out, but an established truth stands through the ages, promising danger and threatening destruction to every lie that comes across its path. Truth is a very dangerous weapon, and everything that is mean and cowardly and false in human nature hates it with all its might.

How attitudes change. Looking over some old newspaper cuttings, we come across the following from the "Daily Telegraph" of April 30, 1918. It referred to a recent Bolshevik Congress in Moscow. The cutting runs:—

"Of the 305 delegates, 184 had been imprisoned for a total period of 315 years. Nineteen had had penal servitude for a total of 96 years, while 104 had been banished to Siberia. So that scarcely anybody had been unpunished in this illustrious assembly. According to the code of honour of the Bolsheviks, representatives of Communism can only by penal servitude obtain the necessary consecration."

This gem deserves to be saved from the dustbin, considering the reasons we have to-day for being thankful that this congregation of "convicts" succeeded in establishing themselves. It is notable that the offences for which these men and women were punished are not named. That would have spoiled the report. And the old gang never apologises.

The Earl of Clanwilliam, who is also chairman of the Association of Conservative Clubs, says, "We shall defeat the enemy in God's good time. But when it is over we of the Conservative Party are going to be the saviours of our country." So it looks as though Hitler, though beaten, will get his revenge. We shall

win "in God's good time"; we understood from Churchill and others that it would depend on guns and planes, etc. Now it is handed over to God, and God only knows when that means an end to the war. Up to the present "God" appears to have been among the casualties.

Very little has been heard of late of the Oxford Group Movement. Perhaps it has had its day, perhaps it has served the purpose for which it was created. The last time it appeared in the public eye was when the question of the young men who belonged to it claimed exemption from military service on the grounds that they were students belonging to a religious movement. It flourished well in America until the war began, then the whole movement was bluntly declared to be a German created agency, part of a fifth column. Since then they have gone out of the news, and nothing seems to be heard of Buchman, their leader.

It will be remembered that in this country it devoted its chief attention to young men of "good families." Also that it began in England after the last war, and flourished during the disastrous Baldwin and Chamberlain Governments, which saw every encouragement given to Germany to re-arm, to Italy to take Abyssinia, Franco with his German and Italian allies to crush the Spanish Republic, and to Japan to attack China. Buchman found many supporters in high places, and there was always plenty of money connected with it. Of course, most of its members were just dupes, but there does seem a mystery about the movement that one day may lead to examination.

Dr. Clifford Adams, psychologist at Pennsylvania State College, carried out a test among university students which showed that the things women were chiefly afraid of were: Being lost in a strange building or place; entering a deserted building; driving at 80 miles an hour; meeting a rat, mouse, worm or lizard; heavy thunder and lightning; travelling in a submarine; travelling by plane in a snowstorm; going blind; losing their sweethearts, and other fears of a similar nature. From this test it is quite clear that America is badly in need of another Amee McPherson to conduct a religious revival campaign, for nobody seems to suffer from the Fear of God.

The Bishop of Bradford (Dr. Blunt) has coined a new phrase for an old lie. In denouncing the present wave of "Agnostic Secularism" (formerly "paganism," "irreligion" or "anti-Christ"), the Bishop said that when the war began we were producing all over the world a generation of "clever devils," of whom the Nazis were special specimens. The implication is obvious. The lie smells to heaven. Is it really necessary to remind his Lordship that not a single member of the Nazi gang has ever repudiated belief in God, or claimed to be Agnostic, or Secularist? Rather do they claim that they are chosen by God to carry out a special mission—and Hitler is still a formal member of the Roman Catholic Church, according to the R.C. method of counting heads.

The homilies of judges and magistrates with which they too often decorate their judgments leave much to be desired. For example. In sentencing a Peterborough clergyman to twelve months' imprisonment, in the second division, for offences against five boys, Mr. Justice Hilbury—the offender was a married man with one child—said that by his conduct the prisoner had "pandered to a rabble ever eager to bring religion into contempt." Now there was no need to make the suggestion that it is a "rabble" who are waiting to attack religion. The attack on religion is being carried on by men and women who hold distinguished positions in the community. It is a slur upon them that was quite unjustified.

As to the non-Christians being "eager to bring religion into contempt" by any means in their power, that is simply not true. Speaking for ourselves, and "The Freethinker" is the greatest sinner, because it is the most outspoken of anti-religious publications in this country, we have refrained from

printing cases in which clergymen and preachers who are not clergymen are brought before magistrates and judges. We have adopted this policy because we see no reason why religious people should be credited with a monopoly of either decency or indecency. Such a list is a legitimate weapon to use against those who take Atheism or religious disbelief as a synonym for ill-behaviour. A judge, above all men, should be careful to avoid falling into this trap and to avoid insulting, even by implication, so large a body of intelligent and earnest men and women. But it is not too late to revise our policy of silence about the conduct of the clergy, and if forced to do so, we may revive it.

This is a century of astonishing contrasts. Social progress in rapid strides accompanies social retrogression in large chunks. In a long report on the subject of child delinquency the Spensborough (Yorks) Education Committee makes a number of proposals that have the merit of tackling this problem on scientific lines. Some of the proposals clearly mark the influence of modern, humanistic thought on the deliberations of the committee; but woven into the scientific plan of the committee's report are some obscenely prominent threads left over from a less scientific and a more religious age.

Perhaps the most obnoxious is the suggestion that more use should be made of corporal punishment on God's little bad 'uns. It should be "justifiably and properly administered," of course—of course, quite so. The big stick must only be used when the big blurbs who use it have failed to tame the little savages by civilised methods. And parents "must not feel so much repugnance to corporal punishment as hitherto." Just so, just so. Too much damned sentimentalism makes the little blighters think they can do as they like. Well, we'll show 'em. More stick, less repugnance; that's the way to talk, by gad. And there should be "more publicity and police in uniform" in juvenile courts. That's a splendid idea. Bobbies in uniform will put the fear o' God into the little devils, and the kids' names in the papers will make 'em feel the criminals they really are. By gad, that is the way to talk. What?

One thing seems crystal clear from these proposals to terrorise the children of Spensborough, however. The "big policeman with a notebook" idea of God has evidently lost its power, because God is ignored as a factor for producing results in this matter. That is all to the good. And, curiously enough (or is it curious?), together with the decline of the power of the God idea there seems to have been a change for the better. These little scoundrels of Spensborough are actually behaving better—though you wouldn't think so from the committee's deliberations.

We will let the youngsters speak for themselves. It may be the only chance they will get. Here is what they could say: "According to the report of our Director of Education, 42 of us were proceeded against for offences in 1939. In 1940 we were behaving better, because only 32 of us were in court. Last year, 1941, we were better than ever, because only 26 of us were in court. We think we are doing very well indeed, and we don't like this silly talk about more stick and more policemen. Such talk doesn't encourage us to behave better." To which we can add, "Hear, hear."

Here is an event that the religious papers declare to be without precedent in our history. Representatives of the Roman Church, the English Church and one of the leading Nonconformist bodies have met together on a public platform to consider what can be done to preserve Christianity in Britain. The "Catholic Herald" has a cartoon showing the three standing on the same public platform, each without any visible weapon of defence and without having a barricade to prevent one going for the other. Is not that a lesson for other countries! It is true it has never happened before, but things are not what they were, and the times are such that the Churches must hang together if they would not hang separately. Surely nothing but the spirit of God could have brought this about—and it has only taken a few centuries to do it. The Trinity in Heaven will lift their haloes to sing the praise of this trinity on earth.

"THE FREETHINKER"

2 and 3, Farnival Street, Holborn,

Telephone No.: Holborn 2601. London, E.C.4.

TO CORRESPONDENTS

J. D. SMITH.—Thanks for reference. Pleased you continue to find enjoyment in "The Freethinker." We shall try to keep it up to its old customary level.

ARCHIBALD ROBINSON.—Next week. Received too late for this issue.

C. MORGAN.—Both the "Almost an Autobiography" and "Materialism Restated" will be reprinted as soon as possible. It is the paper shortage that is blocking us. But our first concern must be for this journal.

WAR DAMAGE FUND.—H. J. Hewer, 1s. 6d.; A. M. Metelonis (U.S.A.), £1 8s. 6d.

Orders for literature should be sent to the Business Manager of the Pioneer Press, 2-3, Farnival Street, London, E.C.4, and not to the Editor.

When the services of the National Secular Society in connexion with Secular Burial Services are required, all communications should be addressed to the Secretary, R. H. Rosetti, giving as long notice as possible.

THE FREETHINKER will be forwarded direct from the Publishing Office at the following rates (Home and Abroad): One year, 17s.; half-year, 8s. 6d.; three months, 4s. 4d.

Lecture notices must reach 2 and 3, Farnival Street, Holborn, London, E.C.4, by the first post on Monday, or they will not be inserted.

SUGAR PLUMS

THOSE who are under the impression that religious persecution no longer exists, or that it is not very active, may be interested to learn, and instructed by the learning, that we have just had a substantial printing order refused on business and personal grounds by a provincial firm. Bluntly we are told that the printer "disapproves" of our opinions. We wonder whether the printer in question really agrees with the opinions of all those for whom he does printing. In that case his religious opinions must be of a comprehensive character, the limitations applying only to Freethinking.

After writing the above we should be pleased to hear from any of our readers who have "contact" with provincial or London printers who are willing to undertake work for books and pamphlets. Once the scarcity of paper is lessened we shall, of course, be done with this particular nuisance. But there are printers whose allowances permit their doing some of the work we have ready. Our need for more printing is urgent.

Last week we casually mentioned the fact that Russia had been better equipped than most countries outside Germany for the war, and they had prepared for it while creating and carrying out new schemes of production, practically creating a new educational system, building on a scale such as Russia had never before known, and turning an illiterate population into a literate one, in the course of a single generation.

Since writing these notes we have been reading J. E. Davies' (U.S.A. Ambassador to Russia in 1936-8) "Mission to Moscow." We have space only to suggest the reading of this book by others, and with particular reference to the trial in Moscow of a number of men holding high places. In our own Press, then under the

influence of the Baldwin-Chamberlain Governments, plus the Churches, these trials were represented as due to the bloodthirstiness of Stalin and his gang of—we leave readers to fill the blank. But this is what Mr. Davies writes of the trial of Bukarin, Rykov, Chernov, Ivanov, Rakovsky and eighteen others, all holding prominent positions in Soviet Russia. And remember that he is reporting to the President of the U.S.A. under date of March 8, 1938: "It now seems that a plot existed in the beginning of 1936 to project a *coup d'etat*. It came out that quite a few at the top were infected with the virus of the conspiracy to overthrow the Government, and were actually working with the secret service organisations of Germany and Japan." And on March 17: "It is my opinion, so far as the political defendants are concerned, sufficient crimes under Soviet law were established by the proof beyond reasonable doubt to justify the verdict of guilty of treason and the adjudication of the punishment provided under Soviet law." Fortunate for us it was that this plot was nipped in the bud.

Mr. Davies says that he tried to awaken people in France and England to the real state of affairs, but failed "specially in Britain." He found there a "violent prejudice." Churchill alone paid attention to what he said. He showed a fair and judicious mind and was "anxious to know the facts." What a chapter in history that period will make if the full story is ever written. Our secret service works well—in keeping the truth from the public. Mr. Davies has helped us to understand why there was no fifth column in Russia when war began. We had ours. But a query remains.

"Russia to-day," says the Carlisle "Diocesan Gazette," "is not godless." Now it is very poor thanks for the Russia that has done so much for us to deal with it in that way. For it suggests that the Russian leaders and millions of the people have deteriorated mentally in the course of the war. And that is not true. Russia is as godless—more godless—to-day than it was twenty or even ten years ago. Of course, there are many, many millions of Russians who are still religious. But it is unkind to make "godless Russia" responsible for them. They, like the others, will grow out of it. Superstition must be artificially fed if it is to live. But bodily and mental ailments that exist over a wide area and with the majority of a people cannot be expected to be cured in a single generation.

Lewes Education Committee is allowing, once a week, children to leave school, during school hours, to attend a religious service. The legitimacy of this practice was questioned in school, but nothing came of it. Most members are very fearsome of offending the religious interests in their constituencies. But it is a sample of things that will occur if the plot hatched by the Archbishops and the Board of Education.

The impudence of it! Stroud has resolved to have cinemas on Sundays. On that, the "Stroud News" comments by saying that for the Council the subject "bristles with difficulties" because it was "against" the desire of several members to prevent further encroachments on the Sabbath. But no one has suggested that these members should be taken by the scruff of the neck and be forced to the cinema. It is they who wish to take the rest of the inhabitants by the scruff of the neck or the seat of their trousers and prevent their spending Sunday as they please. We are a free people—at least, by repute and on the authority of the Home Secretary.

One reason for Stroud taking this daring step is that members of the Forces have nothing to do on Sundays, and lounging about is not healthy. Why then is it healthy for the civilian people in Stroud? We suggest that the religious way out would be to force the civil population to attend, and have three church parades on Sunday. That would "larn" both soldiers and civilians, and prove that freedom is not a mere word with we English people.

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY Seventy-fifth Annual Conference

WAR conditions—involving preoccupations and military duties—prevented many, particularly from the provinces, being present at the Conference, but when the President called to attention, by a rap with the historic hammer, the number present showed a pleasing increase on last year's attendance. A specially encouraging feature was the proportion of young people present who, during the discussions, showed a keen interest in and appreciation of the principles for which the Society stood. The formal business of the opening of the meeting being disposed of, the President read the Annual Report, which with a suggestion by Mr. Drewey that the Executive might consider what could be done by way of creating a "Youth Movement," was adopted by the Conference and ordered to be printed.

The adoption of the financial statement, after a few questions had been answered, was moved by Mr. Sykes and seconded by Mrs. Venton. Carried.

The election of the President followed, and as he was in nomination, Mr. Cohen asked Mr. Rosetti to occupy the chair for the time being. Some very high tributes were paid Mr. Cohen by many present, both for the way in which he had steered the Society during a very trying period, and also for his educational work by his pen. The election was carried with acclamation.

In thanking the members for the renewal of his election, Mr. Cohen said that he had now been President for 27 years, the longest period during which one man had held the office. He was proud of the confidence placed in him. Loyal friends had gathered round with no other incentive than that of devotion to a great cause, and their friendship was maintained for the same reason. There was no other honour in the country that he would feel inclined to step across the road to receive.

The election of the General Secretary followed. The President added his tribute to those paid by others to Mr. Rosetti. He did so because he was in a better position to say more about Mr. Rosetti's qualities than anyone else. There had been a great increase of work in connection with the office, and much correspondence between it and the chiefs of the three Services concerning Freethinkers in the Army, Air Force and Navy. This work is not so showy as writing or lecturing, but it is very important work for the movement as a whole. The resolution was carried unanimously.

The election of the Accountant, Treasurer and Executive followed.

There were five special subjects set apart for discussion, and all of them were well introduced, well discussed and should prove very profitable. There was shown a clear recognition of the distinction between policy and principle, and that while policy should, so far as circumstances permit, work within principle, it can never take its place. The first subject for discussion, "The B.B.C. and Religion," was opened by Mr. Collins. He gave an interesting account of the time spent on religious advocacy; Mr. Thomson pointed out that it was not merely religion that had a monopoly of a hearing, but other subjects of great social consequence. Messrs. Hornbrook, Bailly, Brighton and Miss Woolstone contributed to a lively and helpful discussion. It was resolved that a suitable resolution from the Conference be sent to the B.B.C.

The Conference then adjourned for lunch. Some little delay was caused here, as the number that sat down exceeded that provided for—a serious offence in war-time. But the resources of the Waldorf was equal to the occasion and a very satisfactory meal was provided.

AFTERNOON SESSION

On the Conference resuming, the subject of "Religion and the Armed Services" was introduced by Mr. Ebury, whose plea was that in this war, more even than in the last one, compulsory religious services should be abandoned, and no obstacle should

be put in the way of the attestation of Atheist or Freethinker, or anyone else. Above all, petty punishments for non-attendance at religious services should be abandoned. It made for neither efficiency nor good will. After others had joined in the discussion and the President had explained what had been done by the Executive, the Conference agreed on a suitable protest to be sent to the heads of the three Services involved.

Interest and energy was thrown into a discussion opened by Mr. Hornbrook on the Freedom of the Press. He selected as examples of the conduct of the authorities against which he was protesting the action of the Home Secretary in his method of suppressing the "Daily Worker" and the threat to suppress the "Daily Mirror." In the first case the direct nature of the offence was not stated, and so no one knew what particular issue of the paper, or what part of any particular issue had given offence. In the other case the offending matter was known, but there was a threat to act without trial, either public or in camera. A number of those present took part in the discussion, but with a single exception all were agreed on the impossibility of Freethinkers permitting so gross an outrage on civic liberty without protest.

In summing up, the President said that the position of the Freethinker and of the N.S.S. was quite plain. It did not matter whether the paper suppressed was of the Right or the Left. The great thing was the nature of the suppression. No man should be punished and no paper suppressed unless he knew wherein his offence lay, and without the opportunity of a trial, even though the public be excluded from the hearing. When Carlile came to London he said that he would publish everything the Government said should not be published. He did so, and we Freethinkers have no name in our minds that we honour more than that of Carlile. The policy of the "Daily Worker" did not concern the N.S.S., but it did concern the N.S.S. that journals should not be suppressed in this manner. It is one suppression to-day; it may be ours to-morrow unless the protest is vigorous and sustained. And it may be added that by the method of handling the "Daily Mirror" the Home Secretary had managed to gag most of the papers in this country more easily, at a cheaper rate and with greater damage to freedom of the Press, than has ever happened. A resolution of protest to be sent to the proper authorities was then passed, with a single dissentient.

A resolution was then moved dealing with the present position of the schools of the Churches. This was introduced by Mr. Charles, North Staffs Branch, a very promising acquisition to our movement. He put forcibly the case for freeing children from the incubus of opinions that many would discard if they overcame the initial handicap of religious training. It was a case of liberty for the child as a means of progress for the people. Mrs. Venton gave some interesting information of the extent and manner to which educational committees are packed with people who were really there to look after the interests of the Churches. She was of opinion that if people were awake to this plan it might be checked to a considerable extent. The plan set out by the Board of Education and leaders of the Churches was also discussed and condemned.

A question was raised by one member as to what a parent should do if the educational welfare of his child depended upon his submitting to religious instruction being given. There was a very warm discussion, and then the President summed up by saying they were concerned with principles, and there would arise such situations as had been put before the meeting. It was a matter that must be finally decided by the parent, but he thought that no child would be the worse for being taught the great lessons of intellectual sincerity and honesty, even though that was done at some cost. Home influence might in a given situation be strong enough to enable the boy or girl to grow up a non-Christian, but it would hardly create citizens who place a high value on mental independence and the value of intellectual honesty in moulding character. A

training in intellectual courage and in the value of opinion is not without its importance in life and its influence in the formation of character. His own children had been withdrawn from religious instruction, and he would, of course, like to see other parents follow the same plan.

The last item on the programme dealt with Freethought propaganda, which was dealt with wittily and ably by one of our most successful speakers, Mr. J. T. Brighton. Interesting experiences were given by other speakers, and this brought to an end one of the most successful and promising conferences of the war period.

NEW ATTITUDE IN RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

IF we attempt to analyse the need for this new attitude towards religion, we find it is far less concerned with the constitution of Churches and Sects, and their differences, less even with the "Shaken Creeds"* of a dogmatic Christianity, than with the central truths of religion itself. There is much that goes to prove that it resolves itself into nothing less than the need for a restatement of the idea of God, and that we have reached a threshold of a transitional period of religious thought out of which it seems possible that changes may emerge on a bigger scale than any which have faced us since the Reformation and the New Learning. But the changes will be of a different kind. They will be more exclusively concerned with matters of thought than with the outside aspects of religion. At the time of the New Learning even its greatest men—men of the type of Colet, Erasmus, Thomas More, whose theological thought was in some respects on a plane with that of the present age—were hampered by the ecclesiastical and political aspects of their opinions. At the present day the question is mainly what the individual is to think, and there is a large and increasing number of thoughtful people who are not only outside but deeply mistrustful of any form of official religion.

The spirit of challenge towards religious conceptions which have long held sway is stimulated by the scientific method of enquiry, and although this method does not altogether apply to matters of pure thought, they cannot escape its influence. If, therefore, a belief is to hold good nowadays it must hold good, at any rate to some considerable extent, along the line of personal experience and conviction, the ultimate criterion in matters of religious faith. Now this is just where the conception of Deity as the realisation of ideals both of creative and moral power—controlling all the phases of the physical universe and of human history—is losing its strength as a support to faith. Satisfying to the heart of mankind as it is in itself, so satisfying that many will cling to it through thick and thin, it is constantly being questioned, not only in the light which science throws on the forces of the universe, but in the light of human experience.

Problems of this nature are, it is true, as old as the hills and as insoluble as the riddle of the Sphinx. No spiritual Oedipus may be looked for to solve the enigmas which they raise.

The reality of religion is to be found in aspiration rather than in definition, in the soaring of the spirit beyond the limitations of intellect. Granting all this, we may also admit that at the present time there seems to be a special call for some attempt at restatement, a plea for consistency, so far as this is within reach, in the matter of religious beliefs. Instances of this are constantly to be met with, not only in literature dealing with questions of this kind, but in quite unexpected quarters. Here are two of the latter kind, from books published during the war, trivial as straws in themselves, but, as straws, showing the direction of the current.

*This refers to a long correspondence in the "Times," in the winter months of 1922 between "Modernists" and other Clerics.

1. From "The Red Horizon," by Patrick McGill:—

Two men, on sentry night duty, are conversing.

There was a pause.

"Bill!"

"Pat!"

"Do you believe in God?"

"Well, I do and I don't," was the answer.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't 'old with the Christian business," he replied, "but I believe in God."

"Do you think that God can allow men to go killing one another like this?"

"Maybe 'e can't help it."

"And the war started because it had to be?"

"It just came, like a war-baby."

Note that in this conversation "God" is credited with irresponsibility.

2. From "The Vermilion Box," by E. V. Lucas:—

Letter "Richard Haven to Dr. Sutherland."

"... fatalism is largely on the increase in this country, and how can you wonder? Even simple, trustful souls like my Mother seem to have given up their ancient belief in a personal Caretaker. 'It's all very terrible and wicked and beyond all comprehension' has become their half-dazed attitude, 'but what will be, will be.'"

The keynote of the New Attitude is struck by Mr. Wells in a remarkable passage from his war novel, "Mr. Britling Sees It Through," which, in its passionate force, recalls the utterance of John Stuart Mill that he would "sooner be damned in hell fire" than worship a God who failed to satisfy his moral sense. Although this passage is familiar to many readers, it is necessary for the purpose in hand to quote some of it here. It commences with the same words as the quotation just given from "The Red Horizon." A wife, bereaved, as she believes, of her husband, in the war, asks Mr. Britling:—

"Do you believe in God?"

"Yes," said Mr. Britling after a long pause, "I do believe in God."

"Who lets these things happen. . . Who kills my Teddy, and your Hugh—and millions?"

"No," said Mr. Britling.

"But He *must* let these things happen—or why do they happen?"

"No," said Mr. Britling. "It is the theologians who must answer that. They have been extravagant about God. They have had silly absolute ideas—that He is all-powerful. That He's omni-everything. But the common-sense man knows better. Every real religious thought denies it. After all, the real God of the Christians is Christ, not God Almighty; a poor mocked and wounded God nailed on a cross of matter. Some day He will triumph. But it is not fair to say He causes all things now. It is not fair to make out a case against Him. You have been misled. God is not absolute. . . your teachers and catechisms have set you against God. . . They want to make out He owns all Nature. . . And all sorts of silly claims. . . But God is within Nature and necessity. . . God is the innermost thing. Closer He is than breathing and nearer than hands and feet. He is the other thing in this world. Greater than Nature or necessity for He is a spirit and they are blind, but not controlling them. . . not yet."

"They always told me He was the maker of Heaven and Earth?"

"That's the Jew God the Christians took over. It's a quack God, a Panacea. It's not my God. . . God who fights through men against Blind Force and Night and Non-Existence. . . He is the only King. . . the inevitable King who is present whenever just men foregather. . ."

This passage leads directly to the ground covered by Mr. Wells in "God the Invisible King." Mr. Wells has crystallized, to

use his own word, much of modern religious thought into a creed which satisfies his own needs and which he thinks may satisfy those who are in the same case. The doubt is whether those persons who travel as far as this author has done from the paths of orthodoxy really need any definite creed at all or find themselves capable of accepting it with enthusiasm. Minds of that type can rarely tolerate any trammels except such as they impose upon themselves, and they instinctively reject anything that limits their freedom in matters of thought and faith. However this may be, it is probable that no book since William James' "Varieties of Religious Experience" has created such a stir in the religious world.

On the whole, and in spite of its rejection and denunciation of much that the churches hold dear, Mr. Wells' book was not altogether unsympathetically received by them. This is no doubt because he writes not as an antagonist, but as a friend to the interpretation of life on a religious basis. But perhaps none of his critics, sympathetic or otherwise, realised when the book appeared the deep importance of its main thesis, viz., the need of a new conception of God. This is the part that *really matters*, and Mr. Wells would probably readily admit this.

A new conception of God, one more in harmony with modern ideals, is the corner-stone in any reconstruction of religion, and, viewed in this light, the central idea of the book constitutes a step forward in modern religious thought. Mr. Wells makes no claim, in the present instance, to enter the lists in the expert metaphysical sense. "Here," he says, "we work at a less fundamental level and deal with religious feeling and religious ideas." If there is a philosophic basis to his work, it is a Pragmatist one. He claims that it is the kind of religious belief which fits in with experience.

If definitions must be given, probably most people would find themselves more in sympathy with Matthew Arnold's short and simple one: "The Power, not ourselves, which makes for righteousness." The latter leaves room for the imagination which is an essential element in religious consciousness. It may be said in passing that the two writers, Matthew Arnold and Mr. Wells, are at one in their uncompromising attitude towards the Trinity of the creed-makers. Each of them, like the doctor in Anatole France's "L'Anneau D'Amethyst," "sait trop bien comment les dogmes s'elaborent, se forment, et se transforment," to respect the authority of the creeds. In this connection it must be noted that the form which religious dogmas took when they were in the making, was largely determined by erroneous ideas as to the nature of the physical universe. MAUD SIMON.

(To be continued)

CORRESPONDENCE

SIR,—May I add a slight tribute to that accorded to Mrs. Bradlaugh Bonner recently in "Sugar Plums." Unfortunately, my opportunities for meeting Mrs. Bonner were few—at the Board of the Rationalist Press Association and two or three times elsewhere. There was an attraction about Mrs. Bonner that I cannot define; but I used to think, this is a woman to whom one would go in time of trouble; she seemed to radiate goodness. In reading the "Life of Charles Lamb," by my old friend, E. V. Lucas, I came across the following passage—it might have been written of Mrs. Bonner: "She had a speaking voice gentle and persuasive; there was a certain catch in her utterance which gave an inexpressible charm."

EDGAR SYERS.

DOWN WITH HYPOCRISY

We have done with the kisses that sting
The thief's mouth red from the feast,
The blood on the hands of the king
And the lie at the lips of the priest.

—SWINBURNE.

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY Report of Executive Meeting Held June 4, 1942

The President, Mr. Chapman Cohen, in the chair.

Also present: Messrs. Clifton, Hornibrook, Bryant, Ebury, Bailey, Horowitz, Mrs. Quinton, Miss Woolstone and the Secretary.

Minutes of previous meeting read and accepted. The financial statement presented.

New members were admitted to North London, West London, North Staffordshire Branches and the Parent Society. Lecture reports were noted, further lectures sanctioned and branch balance sheets examined.

Extension of advertising, relations with outside organisations and kindred matters were discussed and decisions reached. A remittance from the executors of the W. J. W. Easterbrook estate was acknowledged.

A report of the Annual Conference, press notices and matters remitted to the Executive were dealt with.

The next meeting of the Executive was fixed for Thursday, July 16, and the proceedings closed.

R. H. ROSETTI,

General Secretary.

SUNDAY LECTURE NOTICES, Etc.

LONDON

Outdoor

North London Branch N.S.S. (White Stone Pond, Hampstead), 12 noon, Mr. L. EBURY; Parliament Hill Fields, 3-30 p.m., Mr. L. EBURY.

West London N.S.S. Branch (Hyde Park), Thursday, 7-0, Mr. E. C. SAPHIN; Sunday, 3-0, various speakers.

Indoor

South Place Ethical Society (Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, W.C.1), 11-0, C. E. M. JOAD, M.A., D.Lit. "The Problem of Mind and Body (2)."

COUNTRY

Indoor

Bradford Branch N.S.S. (P.P.U. Rooms, 112, Morley Street), 7-0, a Lecture.

Outdoor

Blyth (The Fountain), Monday, 7-0, Mr. J. T. BRIGHTON.
Chester-le-Street (Bridge End), Saturday, 7-0, Mr. J. T. BRIGHTON.

Edinburgh Branch (The Mound), 7-30 p.m., Mr. J. GORDON (Glasgow): "Atheism and Modern Social Problems."

Hapton, Saturday, 7-0, Mr. J. CLAYTON.

Kingston-on-Thames N.S.S. Branch (Castle Street), Sunday, 7-0, Mr. J. W. BARKER.

Lumb-in-Rossendale, Thursday, 7-30, Mr. J. CLAYTON.

Newcastle (Bigg Market), Sunday, 7-0, Mr. J. T. BRIGHTON.

North Shields, Thursday, 7-0, Mr. J. T. BRIGHTON.

Rawtenstall, Sunday, 7-0, Mr. J. CLAYTON.