

Current Topics

A 'Question Night' Challenge

We print elsewhere in this issue a letter by Bishop Cleary which appeared in the *N.Z. Herald* of April 1, and which concludes with an important challenge to the representatives of the Bible in State Schools League, to the terms of which we direct particular attention. The challenge was distinct and specific, and was couched in a form that was fair to all parties. In the *Herald* of April 5 the challenge was publicly declined; but it will be repeated again and again as opportunity offers. The challenge strikes one immediately as an excellent idea; and it was at once adopted by Mr. J. A. Scott, and embodied, in a modified form, in the following letter to the *Otago Daily Times*.

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'Sir,—Some short time ago Dean Fitchett, referring to the present Bible in State schools movement, said in effect that he could not remember any great public controversy in which all the evidence and all the argument were so completely on one side and in a later letter in your columns he has said: 'By inquiry and discussion the Bible in State Schools League has nothing to lose and much to gain. Its chief work at present lies in dissipating ignorance and correcting misconceptions.' To the like effect writes the Rev. Alex. Don in your issue of Thursday, in which he expresses the conviction that if the Rev. W. J. Ashford and Mr. J. Caughley only knew all about the Australian system 'these same men would be as strong supporters as they are now opponents.' In similar strain we find the *Outlook* of March 18, in an alliterative outburst, declaring, 'The case for the League is conclusive, because it is fair, full, factual, and final,' and deploring 'the prevalent apathy towards the Bible-in-schools movement' as being the only real obstacle to success. This being the view of the League leaders, they will doubtless welcome a respectful suggestion which I now venture to make. It is that the League should give us a "question night"—that is, a public meeting, under the auspices of the League, at which the programme shall consist solely of answers to questions, and at which the various sections of dissidents from the League's proposals shall have full opportunity of interrogating the League on points which they do not understand or to which they think objection can be taken. A picked man or picked men could be appointed by the League to answer the questions.

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'The advantages of this method of getting at the facts will be obvious. At present League speakers and writers, with only the rarest exceptions, are not meeting the real difficulties and objections that are urged against the scheme. I went myself to the Burns Hall meeting and happened to drop in just as Canon Garland commenced his address. After listening for ten weary minutes to a eulogy of King Alfred, who has been quite a long time dead, I made a disappointed, not to say disgusted, exit. The question and answer method—the questioner having, of course, the opportunity also to question the answer—would obviate such a wicked waste of precious time. It would afford the League—if its members are as confident as they profess—a splendid opportunity for bringing out their case at its full strength, and would enable the enthusiastic *Outlook* representative to give us at least a glimpse of that "fair, full, factual, and final" aspect of the movement which has hitherto escaped our notice. Readers who have followed the correspondence which has appeared in your columns during the last few weeks will easily judge that both the audience and the League representatives would have an interesting, not to say a merry time; and I think I could myself safely undertake that at least the meeting would not fail for want of questions. I sincerely trust that the local secretary of the League will bring this respectful suggestion before his committee, and that the public will be afforded the desired opportunity to come to close grips on this question.—I am, ect.,

'April 4.'

'J. A. SCOTT.'

The League as Religious Persecutor

The following further reply to Mr. A. Morris Barnett, whom the *Outlook* innocently, and of course incorrectly, describes as 'a Jewish gentleman,' and who admitted that he had been "fairly severely handled by Mr. J. A. Scott," appeared in Tuesday's *Otago Daily Times*. 'Sir,—I need not occupy much of your space in replying to Mr. A. M. Barnett's last letter. Let me say at the outset that I have, and always have had, a great respect for Mr. Barnett, not, as he supposes, because he has in the past advocated denominationalism, but because, with all his limitations, he has been unwaveringly loyal to the principle of religious education, and in his synod, in teachers' institutes, and in the press, has stood by it through good report and evil report, whether he had numbers on his side or whether he had to stand alone. Unquestionably his heart is in the cause; and I can only regret that in the present case he has allowed his heart to get the better of his head, and for the sake of the desired end has committed himself to methods that are one-sided, tyrannical, and unjust.

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'In my previous reply to him I pointed out that the Bible in State Schools League is out to compel the Jewish teacher to teach what is to the latter simple blasphemy, and that, it proposes, further, to add injury to insult by compelling Jewish taxpayers to pay for such teaching. This is not, as Mr. Barnett tries feebly to suggest, "an imaginary quibble." It is a simple fact that there are Jewish tax-payers in the Dominion; and it is an equally undeniable fact that they are to be compelled to pay for religious teaching from the New Testament, a book which they do not accept and parts of which they regard as blasphemy against their God. Here is Mr. Barnett's justification of this feature of the League's proposals: "When the Jews have increased in such numbers that a fairly strong Yiddish quarter has been established in the Dominion it would be time to consider the question."

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'With all my respect for Mr. Barnett personally, I cannot refrain from saying that this is a disgraceful defence to come from any Christian man. It is a defence of persecution, pure and simple. Because the representatives of the chosen people happen in this part of the world to be few in number their consciences are to be forced and their rights denied. In its spirit it is of a piece with a like utterance to be found in the editorial columns of the *Outlook* of March 18. "The sceptic," writes the Acting-Editor, evidently a minister, "is an alien from the religious principles on which the civilisation of the Dominion as part of the British Empire and of Christendom is built, and in virtue of that fact must be immediately ruled out of court." The sceptic has a pocket, and will be graciously permitted—nay, compelled—to "pay, pay, pay" for the religious instruction in which he does not believe; but when he ventures to mention that he has also a conscience, and that he objects to his money being taken to pay for the teaching of what he regards as religious error, then he "must be immediately ruled out of court." On this amiable principle Hume and Humboldt, Huxley and Haeckel, Mill and Tyndall, Blatchford and Mark Twain would all be classed as "aliens," and by the great intellect which penned the *Outlook* article would be "immediately ruled out of court." I hold, of course, no brief for scepticism, which I love as much as the devil is said to love holy water; but I draw the line at the principle—suggested by the *Outlook* writer and acted on by the League—that unbelievers are to be treated as having no rights. I notice that one of your correspondents, recognising the absolutely misleading character of the name taken by the League—whose proposals, if adopted to-morrow, would not put a single Bible in a single school in the Dominion—has been casting about for some more truthful title for the organisation. In view of the utterances quoted above and of the League's attack on the rights of dissident teachers and taxpayers I suggest in all seriousness that the name, the Religious Persecution League, would accurately fill the bill.

Better Teeth

AT HOWEY WALKER'S,

Low Pain.

QUEEN STREET, AUCKLAND,
Less Expense.