

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## CHRIST VS. SOCRATES

ALTHOUGH I have great respect for Reinhold Niebuhr as man and moralist I consider his essay "Christ vs. Socrates" [SR Dec. 18] a classic example of theological obscurantism. I challenge anyone, including the author, to explain the meaning of the following statements in such a manner that their truth or falsity might conceivably be determined: "But there is no possibility of an ultimate redemption of the self from itself"; and, "The self has the power to transcend nature and reason . . ." Doubtless, these sentences are capable of profound interpretation by those initiated into the esoteric mysteries of metaphysics, but the ideas of a self being redeemed from itself and a self-transcending nature and reason are meaningless to ordinary mortals.

C. W. GRIFFIN.

Erlton, N. J.

## REMARKABLY FAIR

IN "CHRIST VS. SOCRATES" Reinhold Niebuhr has proved once more his ability to write thought-provoking observations on the application of Christian principles in judging the modern world. For a man so thoroughly committed to the viewpoint of one particular faith and writing in the teeth of modern conviction he is remarkably fair. He seems to be nearly as well aware of the sins of many devout Christians as he is of the opposing shortcomings of the rest of us.

However, when he says "religion may be the engine of cruelty" he is surely thinking of the harshness and intolerance that may be incidental byproducts of vehement convictions; he is clearly not thinking of the cruelty to human nature implicit in his central demand for "a broken spirit and a contrite heart." To insist that the pot be made over, even if it be broken in the process, seems a curious way of showing one's esteem for the maker.

RICHARD KIRK WASHBURN.  
Springfield, Mass.

## NIEBUHR VS. HUXLEY

In the excellent article "Christ vs. Socrates," by Reinhold Niebuhr, I take it that he disavows Aldous Huxley as a Christian, and on reading his "The Perennial Philosophy" finds Huxley merely a "humanist," an "intellectual," and a "mystic." He says Huxley finds "Christian faith incredible."

I have read Huxley's book twice, and while he quotes generously from the Oriental philosophies, he gives great space to such writers as Law, Eckhart, St. Francis, St. Bernard, St. Augustine, John Woolman, Fenelon, and hosts of other saints of the Christian church, or devout Christians, all of whom testify to the simple verities of the Christian religion through faith. I admit it was somewhat of a shock to find Mr. Huxley writing



"I see Capital and Labor are coming back."

along this line after reading his "Point Counter-Point" and "Eyeless in Gaza." To give Mr. Huxley but one quotation of his own from this remarkable book, "The Perennial Philosophy," "Not I, but God in me . . . . . In any given instance, human grace may be wholly good, inasmuch as it helps the recipient in the task of achieving the unitive knowledge of God; but because of its course in the individualized self, it is always a little suspect and, in many cases, of course, the help it gives is help towards the achievements of ends very different from the true end of our existence." I cannot find any negation of Christian faith in this or any substitution of some mystic vacuities for faith in Biblical revelation.

J. MILNOR DOREY.  
Williamsport, Pa.

## A TIME FOR PEACE

THE MAN who wrote, "The factor in human life provocative of a noble discontent is the gradual emergence into prominence of a sense of criticism, founded upon appreciation of beauty, and of intellectual distinction, and of duty," named this critical discontent the gadfly of civilization. Alfred North Whitehead also named peace as one of the five essential qualities whose joint realization in social life constitutes civilization. If a critical discontent is founded partly upon intellectual distinction, how can Warren Weaver ["Peace of Mind," SR Dec. 11] try to make peace and anesthesia appear synonymous? How can he speak of Schweitzer and not mention Gandhi? How can he be so certain about the temperature of hell when Einstein has introduced us to a new universe where certainty is disappearing into a region not amenable to exact interpretation?

It is said in the Book of Ecclesiastes: "To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven." It may be there is a time for restlessness, and a time for peace. Peace has been described as a gift—the experience of which is largely beyond the control of purpose. May God pity Weaver, as he asks, on the day when he has lost his restlessness; and may He give him peace if the time comes when he asks for peace.

ROVENE R. OHRENSTEIN.  
Winslow, Wash.

## "FANNY" OR MISHMASH?

BENNETT CERF's comments on "Fanny" [TRADE WINDS, this week] make a good deal of sense, particularly his statement that reviewers should hear a score more than once before judging it. Unfortunately, there is usually no opportunity (as there is for opera critics) for a theatre critic to hear a score more than once before the deadline.

As far as "Fanny" is concerned, there seems to be no great quarrel between us. Both Mr. Cerf and I praised Mr. Rome's score *per se*. What Mr. Cerf and I do differ about is the yardstick of overall opinion. He seems to state that a conglomeration of "above-average" elements must add up to a thoroughly happy result. My own yardstick, on the other hand, is that in any fine piece of writing or theatre wisely-chosen elements should react and interlock with each other to produce a distinctive, original compound. I applaud all the good work that has gone into "Fanny," but deplore the random mishmash of a result.

HENRY HEWES.  
New York, N.Y.

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# Seeing Things

## TOPS AND SECRET

IN HAPPIER times the man who once described himself to Woodrow Wilson as "your one and only Vice" contended that "what this country needs is a good five-cent cigar." Years later, when depression stalked the land, FPA amended Vice President Marshall's statement to read, "What this country needs is a good five-cent nickel." His amendment stands. Five-cent nickels would still come in handy. Though the theatre also bristles with needs, one need that it has suffered from for far too many seasons is a first-rate courtroom melodrama, a gap now happily filled by the arrival of Agatha Christie's "Witness for the Prosecution."\*

There are people whose distaste for courtroom melodramas is militant. The crackle of questions throughout an evening annoys them. If they dabble in crime literature at all, they want their horrors straight.

The vast majority of theatregoers (count me among them) feel differently. Even if in my fashion they never succeed in guessing the guilty, they enjoy trying to do so. When it comes to devising such Cock Robin games, Miss Christie is an old hand and has seldom been more ingenious than in "Witness for the Prosecution." In a melodrama of this type the dialogue can, as writing, be as undistinguished as the words spoken daily by witnesses and lawyers in any courtroom in any land. But literature is not the object of this kind of playmaking and, quite rightly therefore, is not the concern of Miss Christie or her devotees. Hers is an engineering rather than an architectural endeavor, a matter of building instead of decorating, and the murder puzzle she builds in "Witness for the Prosecution" is highly diverting.

The program requests audiences not to divulge Miss Christie's solution of her plot. This is as it should be. To spoil the fun of future playgoers by telling them what happens would in itself be a crime. Suffice it to hint that Miss Christie is telling the story of a young husband whose only chance of not being convicted for the mur-

der of a rich spinster depends upon the evidence of his unpredictable wife. Perhaps it is fair to add that never have more startling twists been crowded into the concluding scene of a melodrama than in the last ten minutes of "Witness for the Prosecution."

As surely as Miss Christie knows how to keep such shenanigans suspenseful, amusing, and properly perplexing as they shuttle between the defense counsel's chambers and the courtroom, so do the actors in the New York company under Robert Lewis's expert direction. Patricia Jessel, who created the part in London, plays the wife brilliantly. She is frightening in her coldness and her mixture of power and instability. Ernest Clark's attorney for the prosecution is wonderfully arctic in his chilliness, his hauteur, and quiet condescension.

Gene Lyons seems to me to overplay the hysteria of the husband being tried, though by doing so he may contribute values unsuspected by Miss Christie. Horace Braham is a suavely dominating judge; Una O'Connor amusing as the old Scots servant who is a complete individualist; and Michael McAloney highly entertaining as an insolent expert for the Crown. Excellent as the cast as a whole is, however, the performer who gave me my most abiding delight is Francis L. Sullivan.

Mr. Sullivan is not an undernourished man. To see him at work is to see the theatre in the round. His face resembles a double exposure of a photograph of Charles Laughton. But if his girth and jowls are large, so are his gifts. He can pant at one moment like a beached whale and at the next read a long speech with incredible fluency and innuendo. His full moon of a face can assume an expression of childlike innocence with the same ease that it can be diabolical, insolent, gay, or immensely likable. He is as fat as the part and makes the most of it. He, his fellow actors, Gilbert Miller and his associates, and, above all, Miss Christie have the heartfelt thanks of all of us who have been hungering for an excellent courtroom melodrama. I cannot imagine a more agreeable form of jury duty than seeing "Witness for the Prosecution."

—JOHN MASON BROWN.

\* WITNESS FOR THE PROSECUTION, by Agatha Christie. Directed by Robert Lewis. Settings by Raymond Sovey. Produced by Gilbert Miller and Peter Saunders. With a cast including Francis L. Sullivan, Patricia Jessel, Ernest Clark, Gene Lyons, Una O'Connor, Robin Craven, Horace Braham, etc. At Henry Miller's Theatre, New York City. Opened December 16, 1954.