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[Page 24.]

BLASPHEMY MEETING

'The present campaign is probably the final stage in the fight against blasphemy laws that has been going on for nearly 200 years.' This was the claim of Bill McIlroy, Hon Secretary of the Committee Against Blasphemy Law, when he introduced a public meeting on 'Blasphemy Law and the Gay News Case.' The meeting took place at the Marlborough Hotel, Brighton, on Sunday 22 January 1978, and was organised by the Committee Against Blasphemy Law. The speakers were Nicolas Waiter, Editor of 'New Humanist', Michael Mason, News Editor of 'Gay News', and Francis Bennion, barrister and Executive Committee Member of the Defence of Literature and the Arts Society.

Mr McIlroy also said: 'There are elements in the Director of Public Prosecutions' and the Attorney General's departments who support censorship and repression. And it was evident to those who attended the *Gay News* trial last July that Mary Whitehouse has friends not only in high places, but in the highest places.

'Mrs Whitehouse believes that God is on her side. But she doesn't need supernatural assistance so long as she can depend on bewigged Establishment puppets to do her dirty work for her.'

Nicolas Walter said that the case was significant not only because of its connection with the gay community and blasphemy law, but also for the wider principle of free speech. Religion, he said, was a taboo subject, like sex and the state. The law about what you can say in these areas has always been unclear. No-one has ever been certain what blasphemy is, and its use in the law courts has always been peculiar and unexpected; so it was impossible to predict whether a piece of writing was blasphemous or not. The Appeal judges were likely to show themselves just as confused about the state of blasphemy law as anyone else.

In the case of James Kirkup's poem, it was clearly the explicit homosexual aspect which had disturbed people, since the poem was the reverse of being anti-religious. It had just the right mixture of sex and religion to cause confusion. A straight attack on religion in, say *The Freethinker*, would not be prosecuted.

He concluded by stressing the importance of the poem remaining available. 'Mrs Whitehouse must be shown that she cannot stop the poem being read.' However, freedom does not come from public meetings and lobbying MPs. It has to be taken, not asked for. This should be done by circulating the poem.

Michael Mason referred to himself as someone who had been in the firing line at the time of the trial since he worked for *Gay News*. While mentioning his own enthusiasm for football, he commented: 'If only Mary Whitehouse had the good manners of your average football hooligan. Her team discredited her side by their action.'

It is very dangerous to protect people from being offended. We must expect to give and take a little offence in social intercourse. There could be no possibility of legislating for belief.

The case had placed Christians in a dilemma, for the poem accepted basic Christian ideas such as Jesus as the son of God, resurrection, and the doctrine of atonement. 'The Authorized Version of Christ that emerged from the Old Bailey was the well-behaved Jesus of the Tupperware party,

promising to save his flock from nothing more serious than income tax.' *Gay News* was caught in the cross-fire of evangelical politics, in the conflict between the tambourine wavers and the 'over-liberal' churchmen. Gay Christians, he said, had come out worst from the trial. The opportunity to get rid of the law should now be taken. It was very important for those who might fall foul of the law in the future.

Francis Bennion, speaking as a lawyer, commented on the legal aspects of blasphemy law as it had been used in the past and in the *Gay News* case. No-one would enact such a law now. A disturbing feature of the case was the way the normal committal proceedings were by-passed. Another strange aspect of the trial was that expert evidence was not allowed.

A change in the law was important, said Francis Bennion, and a relevant Bill was being introduced into the House of Lords by Lord Willis in the near future. Extracts of the poem were read by Mr Bennion on the grounds that people had a right to know what the poem was about. 'This antique law' he said, 'is an unwarrantable interference with free speech and communication.'