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IMPRESSIVE SUPPORT FOR STATEMENT AGAINST BLASPHEMY LAW

Actress Glenda Jackson, writer J. B. Priestley, film director Jack Gold, novelist Margaret Drabble, theologian Professor G. W. H. Lampe and concert pianist Peter Katin are among the signatories to "A Statement Against Blasphemy Law". The statement was published by the Committee Against Blasphemy Law on 8 January. The signatories deplore the trial for blasphemous libel of the editor and publishers of "Gay News", oppose any extension of blasphemy law and urge that a Bill is introduced into the House of Commons to prevent future prosecution for blasphemy or blasphemous libel.

Over 20 members of both Houses of Parliament have signed. They include Lord Gardiner, a former Lord Chancellor, and Lord Willis, who is known to favour the introduction of a short Bill to end blasphemy law. Members of the House of Commons who have signed include Brian Sedgemore, MP (Labour, Luton West), who declared immediately after the conviction of *Gay News* that he would be prepared to sponsor a Bill to end blasphemy law. Mr Sedgemore had warned, at a public meeting organised by the National Secular Society earlier in the year, that the prosecution against *Gay News* was part of the "illiberal, authoritarian mood of our age", and that "We may see more of it before the decade is out."

A group of prominent Christian writers and lay people, who have also signed the statement, include George W. Target, author of many books on religious affairs, Dr Una Kroll, a deaconess well known for her stand over the importance of women in the churches, Christopher Driver and A. E. Dyson. Clerics who have signed are the Rt Rev Alfred Jowett, Dean of Manchester and Dr John A. T. Robinson. There can be no doubt that moderate Christian opinion favours a change in the law.

Quite distinct interests have come together in making the statement, as is seen by the signatures of Canon John Hester, Vicar of Brighton and Professor James H. Sang, President of the Brighton and Hove Humanist Group. "This statement and these signatures show how many people of moderate opinion support the complete abolition of blasphemy law", commented Nicolas Walter, Editor of *New Humanist* and author of the pamphlet *Blasphemy in Britain*. He said that the statement was important not only because it pressed for the abolition of blasphemy law but also because it opposed any extension of the blasphemy law, for which there has been some demand.

The Hon Secretary of the Committee Against Blasphemy Law, W. McIlroy, who wrote the statement and solicited support for it, has said that he is pleased, but not surprised, that such a variety of individuals have signed it. "The publication of the statement", he said "will, I hope, help to stimulate the campaign to abolish blasphemy law. Its supporters cover a surprisingly wide spectrum of opinion. It is significant that people like A. E. Dyson and Michael Duane, Francis Bennion and Peter Hain, and Brigid Brophy and the Dean of Manchester, should join forces on this important issue. "

Full Statement and Signatories

The full statement and list of signatories reads as follows:

"We deplore the recent trial and conviction of the editor and publishers of *Gay News* on a charge of blasphemous libel. This was the first successful prosecution for the 'crime' of blasphemy in over 50 years, and it demonstrated that the common law can be a device by which censorious elements can, by using the courts, impose their standards on all.

"The common law offence of blasphemy is clearly a threat to freedom of expression in religious, literary and artistic matters. So long as it is possible....

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.....for litigious persons to initiate legal proceedings for blasphemy or blasphemous libel, the threat of prosecution, often resulting in crippling financial outlay and even the danger of imprisonment, will hang over artists, writers, journalists, publishers and commentators. This is intolerable in a free society.

"For three centuries the blasphemy laws were a blot on the Statute Book, and their removal with the passing of the 1967 Criminal Act and the 1969 Statute Law (Repeals) Act was welcomed by freethinkers and libertarians. At that time some reformers did not believe that the common law offence merited attention, but the *Gay News* case has highlighted the urgent necessity to deal with this anachronism.

"We are concerned that attempts may be made to extend blasphemy law to protect other forms of religion in addition to Christianity. Such a proposal may appear to be just and reasonable, but whereas the protection of Christianity alone has, to date, been the *raison d'etre* of blasphemy law, its extension would encourage zealots of other religious faiths to exploit this obsolete law.

"The result would be to increase the divisions between the religious and radical groups within the community. A more satisfactory solution would be to recognise the pluralist nature of our society and to abolish the offence of blasphemy altogether.

"We urge that a Bill is introduced into Parliament to prevent future prosecutions for blasphemy or blasphemous libel. The passing of such a Bill would be welcomed both by traditional opponents of blasphemy laws and by those perceptive Christians who recognise that such laws are discriminatory and absurd."

John Allegro, Lindsay Anderson, Professor Sir Alfred Ayer, Joan Bakewell, Lord Beaumont, David Benedictus, Francis Bennion, Humphry Berkeley, Benedict Birnoerg, H. J. Blackham, Oswald Blakeston, Edward Blishen, Louis Blom-Cooper, QC, Anthony Blond, Edward Bond, Melvyn Bragg, Colin Brewer, Alan Brien, Lord Brockway, Professor Hugh Brogan, Brigid Brophy, Alan Brownjohn, Humphrey Burton, John Calder, David Caute, Lord Chorley, QC, Richard Clements, Peter Cotes, Professor Bernard Crick, Tom Cullen, Don Cupitt, Reginald Davis-Poynter, Margaret Drabble, Kay Dick, Christopher Driver, Michael Duane, Maureen Duffy, A. E. Dyson, Geoffrey Edge, MP, Professor, Richard Ellmarin, Gavrn Ewart, Martin Iannery, MP, Lord Foot, Michael Frayn, Julian Friedmann, Lord Gardiner, Jack Gold, Geoffrey Gorer, Phyllis Graham, Peter Hain, Willis Hall, Dr James Hemming, Jim Herrick, Canon John Hester, Vicar of Brighton, Dr Richard Hoggart, Michael Holroyd, Lord Houghton, Robin Houston, Glenda Jackson, Derek Jacobi, Hugh Jenkins, MP, Mervyn Jones, The Rt Rev Alfred Jowett, Dean of Manchester, Miriam Karlin, Peter Katin, Ludovic Kennedy, Professor Frank Kermode, Margaret Knight, Dr Una M. Kroll, Keith Kyle, The Rev Professor G. W. H. Lampe, Rodney Legg, Denis Lemon, Michael Levey, Jack Lindsay, The Earl of Listowel, Christopher Logue, Professor Norbert Lynton, Christopher Macy, Bryan Magee, MP, Frank Marcus, Joan Maynard, MP, William McIlroy, Ian McKellen, George Melly, David Mercer, Joan Miller, Adrian Mitchell, Naomi Mitchison, Sheridan Morley, Lord Norwich, Charles Osborne, Peter Owen, John Parker, MP, Dr Colin Phipps, MP, Giles Playfair, Christopher Price, MP, J. B. Priestley OM, Lord Raglan, F. A.

Ridley, Dr John A. T. Robinson, Annie Ross, Paul Rotha, Dr Edward Royle, Michael Rubinstein, Dora Russell, The Earl Russell, Jeremy Sandford, Professor James H. Sang, Michael Schofield, Brian Sedgemore, MP, Renee Short, MP, Jon Silkin, Barbara Smoker, Colin Spencer, George W. Target, Maurice Temple Smith, Philip Toynbee, Lorna Tracy, John Trevelyan, David Tribe, Jill Tweedie, Kenneth Tynan, Nicolas Walter, Colin Ward, Irving Wardle, Ben Whitaker, Audrey Williamson, Lord Willis, Angus Wilson, Colin Wilson, Enid Wistrich, Baroness Wootton and David Yallop.

The following have also signed but arrived too late for classification above: Alan Coren, John Lehmann, Olivia Manning, Harold Pinter, Professor Sir Fred Hoyle.

Copies of the statement and a Newsletter from the Committee Against Blasphemy Law are obtainable from W. Mcllroy, 32 Over Street, Brighton Sussex.

COMMITTEE AGAINST BLASPHEMY LAW
FIRST PUBLIC MEETING
Sunday, 22 January, 5.00 pm

Marlborough Hotel, Pavilion Street (off Old Steine), BRIGHTON

FRANCIS BENNION, Writer, Barrister and member of the executive Committee of the Defence of Literature and the Arts Society

MICHAEL MASON, News Editor of *Gay News*

NICOLAS W ALTER, Editor of *New Humanist*. Author of *Blasphemy in Britain*