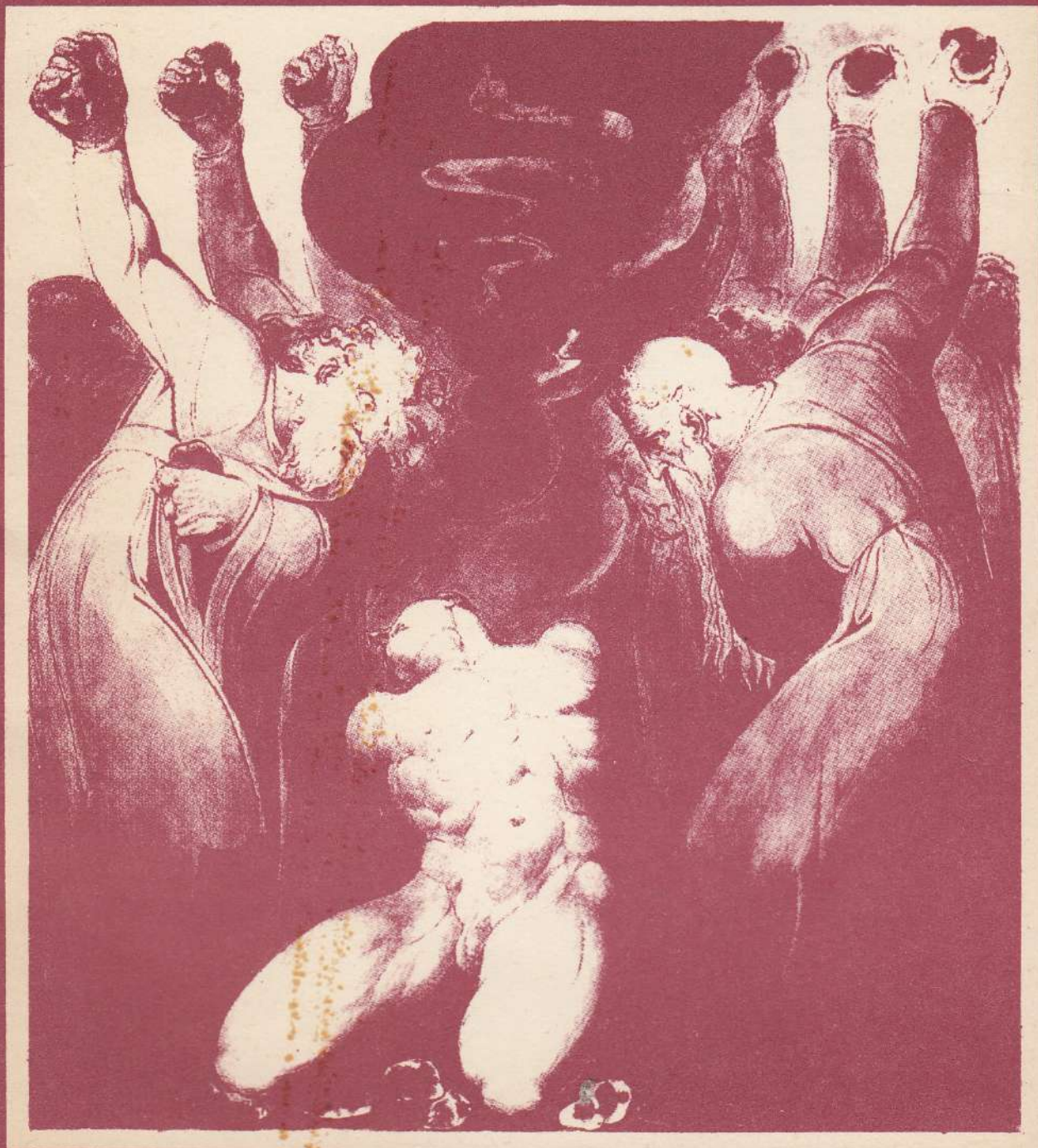


# Buddhism and Blasphemy

## Sangharakshita

(D. P. E. LINGWOOD)



**BUDDHISM  
AND  
BLASPHEMY**



*by the same author*

MESSENGERS FROM TIBET AND OTHER POEMS

A SURVEY OF BUDDHISM

ANAGARIKA DHARMAPALA: A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

THE THREE JEWELS: AN INTRODUCTION TO  
BUDDHISM

THE ESSENCE OF ZEN

CROSSING THE STREAM

THE PATH OF THE INNER LIFE

THE THOUSAND-PETALLED LOTUS: AN ENGLISH  
BUDDHIST IN INDIA

THE ENDLESSLY FASCINATING CRY

# **BUDDHISM AND BLASPHEMY**

**BUDDHIST REFLECTIONS ON  
THE 1977 BLASPHEMY TRIAL**

**SANGHARAKSHITA  
(D. P. E. LINGWOOD)**



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## BUDDHISM AND BLASPHEMY

In common with most other people, Buddhists in Britain have always believed that they enjoyed complete freedom of expression in religious matters and that punishment for such "crimes" as heresy and blasphemy was a thing of the past. This belief has now been rudely shattered. In July 1977 the editor and publishers of the newspaper *Gay News* were tried at the Central Criminal Court on a charge of blasphemous libel. Both were found guilty. The editor, Denis Lemon, was sentenced to nine months' suspended imprisonment and fined £500; the publishers, Gay News Ltd, were fined £1000. In March 1978 their appeals against these convictions were dismissed although Lemon's nine-month suspended sentence was quashed. Shortly before this, Lord Willis had made an unsuccessful attempt to have a bill abolishing the offence of blasphemy passed by the House of Lords.

English law comprises statute law and common law. Statute law is law made by the "sovereign power", i.e. the Crown in Parliament. Common law is customary law based upon precedent. The statutory offence of blasphemy having been abolished in the law reforms of 1967 and 1969, Lemon and Gay News Ltd were prosecuted under the common law of blasphemy and blasphemous libel (written blasphemy), developed by judges between the years 1676 and 1922, which like the rest of the common law the reforms of the 'sixties had left untouched. The last successful prosecution for blasphemy had taken place as long ago as 1922, when W.J. Gott was sentenced to nine months' hard labour for distributing *God and Gott*, *Rib Ticklers*, and pamphlets with similar titles, as well as for "annoying" bystanders. (He died a few weeks after his release from prison.) It had therefore been widely assumed that the common law of blasphemy was a dead letter whose repeal was unnecessary because it was obsolete. This assumption has now been shown to have been mistaken. No unrepealed law is ever obsolete.

The trial and conviction of Denis Lemon and Gay News Ltd, and the failure of their appeal, surprised and shocked the British public. Meetings protesting against the convictions, and demanding the abolition of the blasphemy laws, were held in London and elsewhere. In August 1977 the Committee Against Blasphemy Law was formed, while in the following year the United Order of Blasphemers, founded



in 1844 and since fallen into hebetude, was re-formed with the aim of publishing and distributing works which had resulted in blasphemy prosecution. At least half a dozen political papers and several student journals republished 'The Love That Dares to Speak Its Name', the "blasphemous" poem by James Kirkup which was the cause of all the trouble. It was also republished by the Free Speech Movement, thanks to whom thousands of copies of the poem are now in circulation, some of them bearing the signatures of more than a hundred well-known persons. On July 4th 1978, the anniversary of the by now notorious trial, copies of a petition were sent to the Home Office by individuals who had collected signatures. The petition, which had been initiated by the Committee Against Blasphemy Law, deplored the Appeal Court's decision to uphold the convictions of Denis Lemon and Gay News Ltd for blasphemous libel. It also expressed concern at the possibility of the blasphemy law being extended to cover religions other than Christianity.

One of the main reasons for the widespread nature of the concern aroused by the *Gay News* blasphemy trial is the unsatisfactory and uncertain state in which the conviction of the two defendants has left the law of blasphemy, and the fear that it will once again be used to hinder the free expression of opinion about religion. Parliament has never defined blasphemy. In the course of the last three hundred years the offence has been interpreted by various judges and juries in widely different ways. Originally, the mere denial of the truth of the Christian religion, or of any part of it (e.g. miracles, the divine authority of the Bible, the doctrine of the Trinity, the Divinity of Christ), constituted blasphemy and could be punished with fine, imprisonment and "infamous corporal punishment". Later (in 1893), blasphemy was held to consist, not in the denial of the truth of Christianity, but in "indecent and offensive attacks on Christianity or the Scriptures or sacred objects or persons, calculated to outrage the feelings of the general body of the community". Finally, at the hearing of Gott's appeal, it was ruled that the law of blasphemy covers material which is "offensive to anyone in sympathy with the Christian religion, whether he be a strong Christian, a lukewarm Christian, or merely a person sympathizing with their ideals", who "might be provoked to a breach of the peace". Thus between 1883 and 1922 a change in the interpretation of the law of blasphemy took place. In 1883 it was necessary to outrage the feelings of "the general body of the community". In 1922 all that one had to do was to offend even a single person sympathetic to Christianity.

At the *Gay News* trial there was a further change in the way the law was interpreted. Ruling against the defence argument about inten-



tion, the judge stated that in order to establish that the offence of blasphemy had been committed there was no need to prove intention to attack Christianity, or to cause a breach of the peace. Blasphemy was committed even if there was only a *tendency* to cause a breach of the peace. Despite this ruling, the prosecution produced no evidence that the publication of James Kirkup's poem had in fact had any such tendency. All they did was produce a single witness whose evidence showed that the poem had been published and that one "sympathiser with Christianity" had been shocked and disgusted by it. *This was sufficient to secure convictions.* The current interpretation of the law of blasphemy therefore seems to be that blasphemy consists in the publishing of anything that can be proved to have shocked and outraged a single Christian or sympathizer with Christianity. There is no objective criterion of blasphemy. Anything that shocks and disgusts a Christian or sympathizer with Christianity is blasphemous. Therefore, as the Committee Against Blasphemy Law points out, "It is impossible to know in advance what material may be found blasphemous, and almost any controversial material concerning religion could be found blasphemous. The main effect of the law is to inhibit free expression about religion in a way which is elsewhere thought to be completely unacceptable".

This is a state of affairs that gravely concerns every Buddhist in the land. It is well known that the notion of a personal God, the creator and ruler of the universe, has no place in the Buddha's teaching, and that throughout its history Buddhism has in fact rejected the notion as detrimental to the moral and spiritual development of mankind. But such a rejection is undoubtedly painful to the feelings of a great many Christians and sympathizers with Christianity: it shocks and disgusts them. Under the present interpretation of the law any Buddhist bearing public witness to the truth of this fundamental tenet of Buddhism, whether in speech or writing, therefore runs the risk of committing the crime of blasphemy and being punished accordingly. Not only that. Any Buddhist publishing those sections of the Buddhist scriptures in which the notion of an omniscient and omnipotent Supreme Being, the creator and disposer of all, is actually ridiculed by the Buddha in terms which some would regard as being "indecent and offensive" in the extreme (e.g. Kevaddha Sutta, *Digha-Nikaya* No.XI) also runs the risk of committing the crime of blasphemy – even though the offending words were spoken five hundred years before Christianity was born.

It will probably be argued that, whatever the law might say, or be interpreted as saying, it is in the highest degree unlikely that in late 20th-century Britain a Buddhist would be penalised for propagating



his religion. Indeed, it will probably be argued that the very idea of such a thing ever happening is absurd. But is it? The Buddhist, as one whose freedom of expression is at stake, may be forgiven for doubting whether the idea is so absurd as some people think – or would like him to think. After all, as a statement issued in December 1976 by the National Secular Society pointed out, “For the past 50 years whenever the National Secular Society has campaigned for a repeal of the blasphemy laws, we have been assured that this is unnecessary as these laws could never be used again.” Yet they were used again. Within the year Denis Lemon and Gay News Ltd had been tried and convicted, and the worthlessness of all the assurances that had been given the National Secular Society thereby exposed. Indeed, as the Society’s statement went on to say, only a few weeks before the blasphemy proceedings against Lemon and Gay News Ltd were initiated, the possibility of invoking the blasphemy laws had been raised, on separate occasions, by the Home Secretary and the Archbishop of Canterbury. Even if no direct link existed between the pronouncements of these two personages and the initiation of the blasphemy proceedings, they certainly helped to create the climate of opinion which made the trial and conviction of Denis Lemon and Gay News Ltd possible and turned 1977 into the Year of the Blasphemy Trial.

The truth of the matter is that so long as the blasphemy laws remain unrepealed they can be used, and so long as they can be used the Buddhist does not enjoy full freedom of expression: he is not free to propagate his beliefs. Even agreeing that it is unlikely, even highly unlikely, that a Buddhist who publicly rejected the notion of the existence of God in terms which Buddhists, through the ages, have been accustomed to reject it, or who criticized the moral character of Christ as defective from the Buddhist point of view, would actually be prosecuted for the offence of blasphemy, the possibility of his being so prosecuted nevertheless does, undeniably, exist, and this possibility introduces into the situation an element of uncertainty that no “assurance” can dispel. A Damocles will derive little comfort from the argument that the sword suspended above his head by a single hair is *unlikely* to fall. In any case, we probably concede far too much in agreeing that it is unlikely that a Buddhist would be prosecuted for blasphemy in this country. Lord Willis’s bill for the abolition of the blasphemy law, put forward in the House of Lords in February 1978, was withdrawn without a vote after strong opposition from their lordships “like the baying of distant wolves”. Clearly, there are some Christians who wish to retain the blasphemy laws, and presumably those who wish to retain them would not be averse to using them. This is hardly surprising. Christians have never been remarkable for their



tolerance, and after the events of 1977 and 1978 no Buddhist, – no non-Christian, in fact, – can feel really safe so long as the blasphemy laws remain unrepealed. The baying of wolves, however distant, is not a very reassuring sound to more pacific beasts.

That the blasphemy laws will be repealed within the next few years is at least a possibility. The Law Commission is presently reviewing various aspects of the criminal law with the aim of codification, and since this codification necessarily involves the eventual abolition of all offences at common law it will have to consider blasphemy law. If as a result of the Commission's work the offence of blasphemy is abolished, so that the susceptibilities of Christians are no longer given the special protection of the law, Buddhists will have no cause for complaint. If it is not abolished, Buddhists, in common with other non-Christians, will have to consider their position and decide what action, if any, to take. Meanwhile, we cannot do better than try to make clear what the attitude of Buddhism is towards some of the more important issues raised by the *Gay News* trial, and this is what I propose to do in the remainder of this article. In so doing I shall not be concerned with the fact that *Gay News* happens to be a newspaper for homosexuals, or that James Kirkup's poem had 'homosexual' features. The editor and publishers of *Gay News* were tried, convicted and sentenced for blasphemous libel, and it is solely with the question of blasphemy that I shall be concerned.

The first thing that strikes us in this connection is that for Buddhism there is no such thing as blasphemy. In fact Buddhism does not even have a proper term for blasphemy.<sup>1</sup> This need not astonish us. According to Christian teaching, blasphemy is indignity offered to God in words, writing, or signs. Since in Buddhism there is no place for the notion of God, it follows not only that for Buddhism blasphemy does not exist but that for Buddhists the very concept of blasphemy, and therewith of an offence of blasphemy, is meaningless. St. Augustine remarks that "in blaspheming false things are spoken of God Himself".<sup>2</sup> According to Buddhism it is not speaking a false thing of God to assert that he does not exist, so that from the Buddhist point of view a Buddhist's denial of the existence of God not only is not but cannot be blasphemy. (What would St. Augustine have thought of

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<sup>1</sup> Buddhadatta's *English-Pali Dictionary* does indeed give ariyupavada as the equivalent of blasphemy, but this is a recent coinage not found in *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary*.

<sup>2</sup> *Contra Mendacium*, 39. *Seventeen Short Treatises of S. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo*. (London, 1884), p.466.



the “Death of God” Theology?) Buddhists are therefore unable to accept that it is possible for them to say, or write, or do, anything blasphemous, and to subject them to the operation of a Christian law of blasphemy means forcing them to recognize the offence of blasphemy and, consequently, the existence of God. It means, in effect, preventing them from being Buddhists and forcing them to be Christians.

But even though the notion of God has no place in Buddhism, might there not be some highest object of veneration occupying a position analogous to that of God, and might there not be, for Buddhists, the possibility of blasphemy in respect of that object? The highest object of veneration in Buddhism is The Three Jewels, i.e. the Buddha or spiritually enlightened human Teacher, the Dharma or Teaching of the Way to Enlightenment, and the Sangha or Spiritual Community of disciples practising the Teaching and following the Way. It is to The Three Jewels that Buddhists “Go for Refuge”. The Three Jewels are the embodiments of the highest values of Buddhism and are, as such, jointly the object of the highest Buddhist aspirations. Indeed, it is commitment to The Three Jewels, – to The Three Refuges, – that makes anyone a Buddhist at all. Even the material symbols of The Three Jewels, in the form of sacred images, volumes of the scriptures, and “monks”, are objects of veneration. In the case of Buddhism, then, might not blasphemy consist in indignity offered to The Three Jewels? Might not Buddhists be expected to be just as shocked and outraged, – just as angry and upset, – when The Three Jewels are blasphemed as Christians are when God is blasphemed? For Christianity, of course, the primary blasphemy is denying the existence of God. In the case of Buddhism it would hardly be possible to regard the denial of the historical existence of the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha as constituting blasphemy. In order to blaspheme The Three Jewels it would be necessary to deny the existence, in them, of the attributes which make them what they are, i.e. it would be necessary to deny that the Buddha was the Perfectly Enlightened One, that the Dharma was the Way to Enlightenment, and that the Sangha was practising the Dharma and following the Way. Such “speaking in dispraise” of The Three Jewels, as it is called, is not unknown to Buddhism. Do Buddhists, then, react to it in the same way that Christians react to blasphemy?

The answer to this question can be found at the beginning of the “Brahmajala Sutta”, the opening sutta of the *Digha-Nikaya* or “Collection of Long Discourses [of the Buddha]”, and it is perhaps not without significance that this sutta – in which the Buddha catches as it were in a great net (*brahmajala*) the sixty-two (wrong) views prevalent



in his time – should stand at the very forefront of the entire Pali Canon. The scene of the sutta is the high road between Rajagaha (Skt. Rajagriha) and Nalanda, in the then kingdom of Magadha. The Buddha is going along the high road with a great company of about five hundred bhikkhus. Behind him come Suppiya the mendicant and young Brahmadatta, his pupil. Suppiya the mendicant is speaking in many ways in dispraise of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, while Brahmadatta, even though he is Suppiya's disciple, speaks in praise of them. The same discussion is carried on at the rest-house at which the Buddha and his bhikkhus, and Suppiya and Brahmadatta, put up for the night. In the morning the bhikkhus tell the Buddha about the unusual exchange that has been going on between master and disciple. The Buddha says:

'Bhikkhus, if outsiders should speak against me, or against the Dharma, or against the Sangha, you should not on that account either bear malice, or suffer heart-burning, or feel illwill. If you, on that account, should be angry and hurt, that would stand in the way of your own self-conquest. If, when others speak against us, you feel angry at that, and displeased, would you then be able to judge how far that speech of theirs is well said or ill?'

'That would not be so, Sir.'

'But when outsiders speak in dispraise of me, or of the Dharma, or of the Sangha, you should unravel what is false and point it out as wrong, saying: "For this or that reason this is not the fact, that is not so, such a thing is not found among us, is not in us."

'But also, Bhikkhus, if outsiders should speak in praise of me, in praise of the Dharma, in praise of the Sangha, you should not, on that account, be filled with pleasure or gladness, or be lifted up in heart. Were you to be so that also would stand in the way of your self-conquest. When outsiders speak in praise of me, or of the Dharma, or of the Sangha, you should acknowledge what is right to be the fact, saying: "For this or that reason this is the fact, that is so, such a thing is found among us, is in us."'<sup>3</sup>

How great a difference there is between ancient Magadha and modern Britain! After the suffocating atmosphere of blasphemy laws and blasphemy trials, of convictions for blasphemy and punishments for blasphemy, the words of the Buddha come like a breath of clean, sweet air. This is not to say that in the course of 2500 years of Buddhist history Buddhists were always and everywhere characterized by the spirit of sweet reasonableness that permeates this passage, but that spirit was always plainly and unmistakably present, and its influence was sufficiently powerful to ensure that the history of Buddhism was

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<sup>3</sup> *Digha-Nikaya* No. 1. *Dialogues of the Buddha*. Translated from the Pali by T.W. RHYS DAVIDS. (London & Boston 1973). Part I, pp.2-3.



never darkened by the enormities that repeatedly disgraced the blood-stained record of Christianity.

Now why should this be so? Why should Buddhism be permeated by sweet reasonableness and Christianity by ferocious unreasonableness? The Three Jewels are as much the highest object of veneration for the one religion as God is for the other. Why, then, should Buddhism react to dispraise of The Three Jewels in such a totally different manner from that in which Christianity reacts to blasphemy against God? Why should there be calm consideration of the truth or untruth of the matter on the part of the one, but shock and outrage on the part of the other? In order to answer this question we shall need to look a little more deeply into the nature of the difference between the two religions.

A clue to the difference, or at least a starting-point for its investigation, is to be found in certain of the Buddha's words to the bhikkhus quoted above. If they should feel angry and hurt on hearing outsiders speak against The Three Jewels, he warns them, or elated on hearing them speak in their praise, that would *stand in the way of their own self-conquest*: it would render them incapable of judging the truth or untruth of what had been said. From this it is clear that Buddhism is concerned primarily with the emotional and intellectual, – with the “spiritual”, – development of the individual human being, and that the Buddhist's reaction to “speaking in dispraise” of The Three Jewels must, like his reaction to everything else, be such as to help rather than hinder this process. In other words the centre of reference for Buddhism is man, that is to say, man as a being who, if he makes the effort is capable of raising himself from the state of unenlightened to that of enlightened, – spiritually enlightened, – humanity or Buddhahood.

The centre of reference of Christianity, on the other hand, is God. Or rather, it is the dignity of God. The traditional concept of blasphemy is that it is indignity offered to God in words, writing, or signs, and as the reactions of Christians to the offence make clear, Christianity is concerned primarily with maintaining the dignity of God and preserving him from indignity. But why should this be so? Why should Christianity be so concerned with maintaining the dignity of God? It would be a manifest absurdity to regard speaking in dispraise of The Three Jewels as offering indignity to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Why is it possible to speak of God in this way? The answer to the question is not far to seek. It is possible because God, the supreme object of veneration for Christianity, is seen as the monarch of the universe (in recent times as a constitutional rather than an absolute one, however). Besides being the



Creator of the world, including man, he is its Ruler and its Judge. He possesses in and of his own self absolute power, dominion and authority. God is king writ large – a sort of cosmic Louis XIV or Ivan the Terrible, sometimes kind, sometimes cruel, but in both his kindness and his cruelty equally despotic.

Theologians trained in the subtleties of the schools will argue that such a conception of God is a travesty of Christian belief. But is it really so? Even a cursory study of Christianity as a historical phenomenon reveals that, despite the conceptual refinements of philosophers and theologians, the religious life of Christianity has always been effectively dominated not by any such abstraction as the Ground of Being but by the grandiose image of a stupendous Power vaguely conceived as somehow personal and as accessible to the blandishments of worshippers. Even now it is this image that looms, with varying degrees of definiteness, in the murky background of a great deal of Western – European and American – life and thought. Sometimes, as in the *Gay News* blasphemy trial, we get a glimpse of it rising behind the barriers of more recent concepts much as Flaubert's Carthaginians saw towering above the roofs of their beleaguered city the monstrous brazen statue of Moloch.

It is because God is seen as a sort of cosmic Louis XIV or Ivan the Terrible that offering indignity to him is such a serious matter – such a grave and terrible offence. Offering indignity to an earthly monarch is bad enough, for it is tantamount to an assault on his authority and as such undermines the whole government of the state. Loyal subjects are therefore shocked and outraged by it and dissociate themselves from it as quickly as possible, while the incensed monarch himself is swift to punish the guilty party with a horrible death. Offering indignity to the monarch of the universe is infinitely worse. It is an attack on the divine majesty itself, and as such undermines not just the government of a single earthly state, but the whole divine government of the universe, the entire established order of things. It is a bomb planted at the foundations of existence. Good Christians are therefore not only shocked and outraged by blasphemy but also frightened. They experience a sudden sense of insecurity, as though the ground had given way beneath their feet. Consequently, they not only dissociate themselves as quickly from blasphemy as loyal subjects from high treason (once punishable in England by hanging, drawing and quartering), but turn with hysterical fury upon the blasphemer. Blasphemy is theological high treason. The reactions of Christians to blasphemy resemble nothing so much as the reactions of the frightened subjects of a cruel and suspicious tyrant who, in order to demonstrate their own loyalty and avert any imputation of disloyalty,



are ready to fall with savage violence upon the slightest manifestation of discontent with his rule.

The penalties for blasphemy have therefore always been severe. Under the Mosaic law the punishment for blasphemy was death by stoning. This precedent was followed by Justinian and the Merovingian and Carolingian kings, who also assigned death as the punishment for the offence, as well as throughout the greater part of Christendom. In France, blasphemy was from very early times punished with particular severity. The punishment was death in various forms, burning alive, mutilation, torture and corporal punishment. Apart from an occasional pillorying, since the end of the seventeenth century the punishment for blasphemy in England has been fine and imprisonment. As the *Gay News* trial served to remind us, this punishment is still in force.

The offence of blasphemy being held in such horror, and the penalties attached to it being so severe, one would have thought that, once the nations of the West had been brought into subjection to Christianity, blasphemy would be virtually unknown. Yet, paradoxically, this was not the case. Open and deliberate blasphemy was of course extremely rare, but a tendency to blaspheme seems to have been quite widespread even in those periods when Christianity was most dominant, lurking beneath the threshold of many a Christian consciousness and threatening to break through in moments of emotional stress. Indeed, it was when Christianity was at its most dominant that blasphemy – or the desire to commit blasphemy – seems to have been most widespread. Early Christian ascetics, medieval monks, Counter-Reformation mystics, and Puritan divines, all alike confess to being tempted to commit the terrible offence, some of them in its most extreme and most terrible – because unforgivable – form, blasphemy against the Holy Ghost. As the seventeenth-century author of *The Anatomy of Melancholy* puts it, after painting a lurid picture of the blasphemer's state of mind:

They cannot, some of them, but thinke evil; they are compelled, *volentes nolentes*, to blaspheme, especially when they come to church to pray, reade, &c. such fowl and prodigious suggestions come into their hearts.

These are abominable, unspeakable offences, and most opposite to God, *tentationes faedae et impiae*; yet in this cause, he or they that shall be tempted and so affected, must know, that no man living is free from such thoughts in part, or at some times; the most divine spirits have been so tempted in some sort . . . <sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> ROBERT BURTON, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. (London, 1827), Vol.ii, p.587.



*No man living is free from such thoughts.* These few words tell us more about Christianity, and more about its real effect on the human mind, than its sternest critics have been able to do in volumes. According to Burton "no man living", i.e. no Christian, is wholly free from the compulsion to blaspheme. But why should this be so? Why should any man in his right senses do the very thing from which he shrinks in horror, and for doing which he knows he will be damned – especially when the offence appears to serve no useful purpose whatever? By committing a murder he might ensure his own safety. By stealing he might enrich himself. But there is no possible advantage that he might gain by offering indignity to the all-knowing and all-powerful monarch of the universe, i.e. by committing blasphemy. Why, then, does he do it?

In order to answer this question we shall have to make a distinction between rational blasphemy and irrational blasphemy. Rational blasphemy is blasphemy committed as a logical consequence of one's own beliefs, whether philosophical, religious, or scientific. Thus a Buddhist, believing that no absolute first beginning of the world can be perceived, may deny that the world was ever created and, therefore, that there exists any such being as the Creator of the world, i.e. God. Similarly a Unitarian, believing in the unipersonality of the Godhead, i.e. that the Godhead exists in the person of the Father alone, may deny the Divinity of Christ and the Divinity of the Holy Ghost. Neither the Buddhist nor the Unitarian think of themselves as committing what Christians regard as blasphemy, and their state of mind bears no resemblance to that of which Burton paints so lurid a picture. Indeed for the Buddhist at least, as we have already seen, the offence of blasphemy simply does not exist, its place being taken by the very different concept of speaking in dispraise of The Three Jewels. *Irrational blasphemy is blasphemy committed as the psychological result of the Christian's own largely unconscious resistance to, and reaction against, the very religion in which he believes.* Whereas rational blasphemy is voluntary, irrational blasphemy is involuntary or compulsive. Rational blasphemy is the product of a contradiction between the beliefs of the non-Christian and the Christian, or of the heretical Christian and the orthodox Christian. Irrational blasphemy is the product of a conflict within the soul of the Christian believer himself. Rational blasphemy is extrinsic, irrational blasphemy intrinsic.

The main reason for the Christian's largely unconscious resistance to, and reaction against, Christianity, is to be found in the restrictive and coercive nature of Christianity itself. Christianity is theological monarchism, i.e. God is king writ large. Because God is king writ



large the prescriptions of Christianity are not, like those of Buddhism, of the nature of friendly advice freely offered – offered by the Enlightened to the unenlightened, – to be just as freely accepted or rejected, but behests which, since they embody the will of the Almighty, are matter not for discussion but only for obedience. In the words of St. Augustine, “God’s thundering commands are to be obeyed, not questioned.”<sup>5</sup> These thundering commands pertain to all aspects of human life, from the most important to the most trivial. As mediated by the God-instituted and God-directed church, they oblige the Christian not only to refrain from killing, stealing and lying, which the state would have obliged him to do anyway, but also – at different times – to hear mass once a week, confess his sins to a priest, gives up one tenth of his income to the Church, fast in Lent, abstain from meat on Fridays, not work on the Sabbath, not play on the Sabbath, and not marry his deceased wife’s sister. At the present day the obligations which weigh particularly heavily on the (Roman Catholic) Christian are those pertaining to sex and marriage. Roman Catholics may not limit the size of their families by artificial means, may not engage in any form of sexual activity outside (monogamous) marriage, even within marriage may engage in coitus only in the prescribed manner and for the sake of offspring, and cannot be divorced.

But the obligation which weights most heavily on the Christian, and which has weighed at all times, – the command which thunders loudest in his ears, – is the obligation not to think, i.e. not to think for himself in matters of faith and morals. As Cardinal Manning is reported to have said, “I don’t think. The Pope does my thinking for me.” Instead of thinking the Christian is obliged to believe. He is obliged to believe what the Church – or the Bible – tells him. He is even obliged to be a Christian. In 1864 Pope Pius IX censured as “one of the principal errors of our time” the opinion that “Every man is free to embrace and profess that religion which, guided by the light of reason, he shall consider true”,<sup>6</sup> while in 1832 Pope Gregory XVI denounced as “insanity (*deliramentum*)” the opinion “that liberty of conscience and of worship is the peculiar (or inalienable) right of every man”.<sup>7</sup> Should the Christian refuse to believe what the Church tells him to believe, or even to be a Christian at all, the Church may use

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<sup>5</sup> *De Civitatis Dei*, lib. XVI, cap. xxxi.

<sup>6</sup> ANNE FREEMANTLE, *The Papal Encyclicals in Their Historical Context*. (Mentor Books, 1960), p.145.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.137.



force to bring him to a right way of thinking, i.e. to make him believe, the opinion that the Church "has not the power of using force" being another of the "principal errors of our time" censured by Pope Pius IX.<sup>8</sup> That the Church rarely hesitates to use force when it is in a position to do so is, of course, a matter of history.

Since God's thundering commands as mediated by the Church deprive him of his freedom of thought and conduct, and force him to believe whatever he is told to believe, the Christian experiences Christianity as an immensely powerful oppressive and coercive force that threatens to crush his nascent individuality or, at the very least, compels it to assume unnatural and distorted forms. A compulsion to commit blasphemy is his response to this situation. Blasphemy, i.e. irrational blasphemy, is the reaction of outraged human nature against a Power external to itself whose demands are incompatible with its own capacity, – its own need, in fact, – for free and unrestricted development, that is to say, for full actualization of its moral and spiritual potential. Not that some of the demands made by this Power might not be, in respect of their actual content, helpful to the development of the individual; but coming as they do in the shape of commands, rather than as friendly advice, their form tends to negate their content, the medium to contradict the message. Only too often does God seem to be saying to the Christian, "Love me as I love you – or else!"

Strong as it may sometimes be, however, the Christian's compulsion to commit irrational blasphemy, – his resistance to, and reaction against, Christianity, – remains largely unconscious. (If it became fully conscious he might have to face up to the fact that he was no longer a Christian!) After all, with his conscious mind at least the Christian believes in God, believes in Christianity. Perhaps, like the unfortunate Cardinal Newman, he believes in God but does not trust him, but that is another matter. Moreover, in some periods of history more than in others, blasphemy cannot be committed with impunity, and the Christian will be uneasily aware that, should he venture to offer indignity to the Almighty in words, writing, or signs, – or even in thought, – the whole monstrous machinery of repression would at once spring into action against him. This awareness is sufficient to ensure that any tendency to blaspheme is kept largely unconscious. When the ascendancy of Christianity is undisputed and the Church able to call on the secular arm to enforce its decrees, or when the mundane interests of the twin "establishments" of Church and State

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.146.



coincide (from the beginning of the thirteenth century the Church assimilated the crime of high treason against God to that of high treason against temporal rulers), the compulsion to blaspheme disappears from consciousness altogether: it becomes *completely* unconscious. Thus the conflict within the soul of the Christian deepens: the more oppressive and coercive is Christianity, the greater is his compulsion to blaspheme; but the greater is his compulsion to blaspheme, the more necessary is it for him to repress the compulsion. The only way in which he can resolve the dilemma, – the only way in which he can give expression to his urge to blaspheme without bringing upon himself a fearful retribution, – is by projecting it onto other people. As Wolff says, “Everything unconscious is projected, i.e. it appears as property or behaviour of the object.”<sup>9</sup> Or as Jolan Jacobi puts it, “Everything of which one is unconscious in one’s own psyche appears in such cases projected upon the object, and as long as one does not recognise the projected content as one’s own self the object is made into a scapegoat.”<sup>10</sup>

In France and other European countries at the beginning of the fourteenth century many Christians projected their blasphemous fantasies onto the Templars, who were accused of renouncing Christ and trampling and spitting on the cross, as well as of other enormities, and who were suppressed in circumstances of extreme cruelty, hundreds of them being burned alive. Similarly, in Europe and North America in the seventeenth century the same fantasies were projected onto thousands of harmless old women who were accused of trafficking with the Devil and burned as witches. Even at the present time the soul of the Christian is not free from conflict. The compulsion to blaspheme is, therefore, still projected, and scapegoats are still made. One cannot help wondering whether the *Gay News* trial itself is not a case in point and whether some of the more fanatical supporters of the prosecution of Denis Lemon and Gay News Ltd for publishing James Kirkup’s “blasphemous” poem may not in fact have been struggling to repress their own unconscious resistance to an oppressive and coercive Christianity.

Though the conflict is deepest in the soul of the Christian, it should not be thought that only Christians experience unconscious resistance to Christianity and that, therefore, only Christians experience a compulsion to blaspheme, i.e. to commit irrational blasphemy. Between

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted DR. JOLAN JACOBI, *The Psychology of C. G. Jung*. (London, 1942), p.88.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.24.



the Christian and the non-Christian there nowadays stands the ex-Christian. The ex-Christian may be an atheist or an agnostic, a humanist or a rationalist, a secularist or a Marxist – or a spiritualist or a Satanist. He may even be a Buddhist, i.e. a Western Buddhist. Whatever it is he may be, it can be safely asserted that despite the completely genuine nature of his conversion to the new philosophy and the new way of life in the vast majority of cases he has *not* succeeded in abandoning the religion in which he was born and brought up as completely as he would like to do and that, to some extent, he is at heart still a Christian. The fact need not astonish us. Christianity is not just a matter of abstract ideas but also of emotional attitudes, and easy as it may be to relinquish the one it is often extremely difficult to emancipate oneself from the other. The attitudes in question have, perhaps, been sedulously instilled into one during the most impressionable and formative years of one's life, and little as one may now believe in the monarch of the universe it is sometimes difficult not to feel uneasy when one is actually disobeying his commands – however wicked and pernicious one knows those commands to be. Not without reason has an atheist been defined as a man who does not believe in God but who is afraid of him!

In order to abandon Christianity completely, – in order to liberate himself from its oppressive and stultifying influence, – it may be necessary for the ex-Christian not only to repudiate Christianity intellectually in the privacy of his own mental consciousness but also to give public expression in words, writing, or signs to his *emotional* rejection of Christianity and the God of Christianity, i.e. it may be necessary for him to commit blasphemy. Such blasphemy is therapeutic blasphemy. Just as the ex-Christian stands between the Christian and the non-Christian, so therapeutic blasphemy stands between the purely rational blasphemy of the non-Christian and the irrational, compulsive blasphemy of the Christian. Therapeutic blasphemy is irrational blasphemy in process of becoming rational blasphemy, just as the so-called ex-Christian is in fact a Christian trying to become a non-Christian, i.e. an imperfect atheist, or agnostic, or (Western) Buddhist, as the case may be, trying to become a perfect one. An imperfect atheist, or agnostic, or (Western) Buddhist, and so on, becomes a perfect one to the extent that he succeeds in transforming his unconscious resistance to, and reaction against, Christianity into an integral part of his conscious attitude. Therapeutic blasphemy helps him to do this.

Christianity – including the Church, especially the Roman Catholic Church – has done a great deal of harm in the world. In Europe particularly, it has done more social and psychological damage than any



other system of belief known to history. Crusades, Inquisitions, wars of religion, burnings of heretics and witches, and pogroms are only particularly black spots on a record almost uniformly dark. It was because Christianity did so much harm, – because its attitude was so cruelly repressive and coercive, – that the largely unconscious resistance of many Christians to the religion in which they believed, and their reaction against it, was so strong – and the compulsion to blaspheme so widespread. For the last two hundred years, ever since the rise of the secular state, the power of Christianity to do public mischief has been limited, but even in the twentieth century its capacity to play havoc with the private life of the individual, – its capacity to inflict severe emotional damage on those who fall into its hands, – continues unabated. James Kirkup, the author of 'The Love That Dares to Speak its Name', was one of those who suffered in this way. In the course of a statement about his reasons for writing the poem which he gave to *Gay News* after the trouble started, but which could not be used at the trial (such evidence being ruled inadmissible by the judge), he gives a moving account of his experience – an experience which could, no doubt, be paralleled by many other people.

When I was a little boy, I suffered the misfortune of having to attend a Primitive Methodist Chapel and Sunday School. This dreadful place, like all Christian churches ever since, filled me with gloom, boredom, despondency and sheer terror. I heard the grisly, gory details of the Crucifixion for the first time at Sunday School at the age of five. I was so overcome by revulsion and fright that I fainted with the shock of those gruesome, violent images. When I heard of the fires of Hell and the torments of the damned, my horror expressed itself in outbursts of uncontrollable giggles, my knees shook, and I wet the floor. I, who loathed meat and could not even bear the sight of a cut finger, was informed that I could be "saved" only if I were to be washed in the Blood of the Lamb – which my poor dear parents considered a Sunday lunchtime luxury. I could never take part in Holy Communion, for the very thought of eating bits of Christ's dead flesh and drinking cups of his blood made me sick.

Now I am convinced that young people with impressionable minds should never be exposed to such brutal, sadistic and violent obscenities, whether in church, in books, in the cinema or on television. I wonder how many children were utterly disgusted by Christianity as I was through the constant repetition of these inartistic, tasteless and crude images?<sup>11</sup>

Having had Christianity inflicted on him as a child in the way he has described, it is hardly surprising that, when he grew up, James Kirkup

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted NICOLAS WALTER, *Blasphemy in Britain*. (Rationalist Press Association, 1977), pp.9-10.



should have written a "blasphemous" poem. In so doing he did no more than Blake and Shelley – not to mention Swinburne, Hardy and James Thompson ("B.V.") – had done before him, and for much the same reasons. Modern literature in fact is replete with "blasphemy", i.e. therapeutic blasphemy, as through the medium of poem, or novel, or short story, or drama, or autobiography, writer after writer strove to rid himself of the incubus of Christianity and to awaken into the light of a clearer and cleaner day. Not that – except in a few cases – the writer set out with the deliberate intention of committing blasphemy. If, as sometimes happened, he or his publisher was prosecuted for the offence, more often than not he was extremely surprised. The blasphemy was simply incidental to his own free development as a writer and as a man.

But not everybody is a writer. Not everybody is able to purge himself of the fear and guilt that were instilled into him by his Christian upbringing in ways that are not only therapeutic but creative, even if it had not been a criminal offence for him to do so. What then is the ordinary man, the man who is not a writer or an artist, – the man who is not a scholar or an academic, – to do? In 1883 it was ruled that "the mere denial of the truth of Christianity is not enough to constitute the offence of blasphemy" (a ruling that has since been superseded, blasphemy being now held to be whatever shocks or disgusts a single Christian or sympathizer with Christianity), and that "if the decencies of controversy are observed, even the fundamentals of religion may be attacked." Thus in deciding whether the offence of blasphemy has been committed the point at issue is not the matter but the manner. But can such a distinction in fairness be made? The ordinary man, being neither a biblical scholar nor a theologian, is in most cases unable to deny the truth of Christianity not only without engaging in "indecent and offensive attacks" but also without engaging in "licentious and contumelious abuse applied to sacred subjects" and without speaking or writing or publishing "profane words vilifying or ridiculing God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Ghost, the Old or New Testament or Christianity in general". If he has to observe "the decencies of controversy" and is prevented from expressing his rejection of Christianity in the terms which come naturally to him, – in the terms which are, sometimes, the only ones available to him, – he is prevented from expressing his rejection of Christianity at all. He is effectively silenced.

The reason why the law should permit attacks on Christianity which observe "the decencies of controversy", but not those which do not observe them, i.e. which are expressed in terms of abuse and ridicule, is therefore clear. It prevents the ordinary man, who after all



is in the majority, from saying what he thinks. A learned article in an obscure theological journal expressing mild scholarly doubts as to the validity of Aquinas's third proof of the existence of God would not do much harm to the established order of things. But were the ordinary man ever to rise up and proclaim in his own vivid vernacular his abhorrence of God and his utter detestation of Christianity and all its ways the result might be not only a religious but also a social and political revolution. When G. W. Foote founded the *Freethinker* in 1881 he therefore made it clear that the paper was an anti-Christian organ, and therefore chiefly aggressive, and promised that he would use "weapons of ridicule and sarcasm" as well as "the arms of science, scholarship and philosophy." Ridicule and sarcasm are comprehensible to a far greater number of people than are scientific enquiry, scholarly evidence, and abstract philosophical argument, and attacks on Christianity made with the help of such weapons are likely to be far more effective than those made without them.

It is just because they are so effective that attacks on Christianity which do not observe "the decencies of controversy", i.e. which make use of the weapons of ridicule, sarcasm and so on, are prohibited. The point at issue is not the manner rather than the matter of the blasphemy at all. The manner is the matter. Ridicule, sarcasm and the rest are not so much a different way of attacking Christianity as a different kind of attack on it altogether. In deciding whether the offence of blasphemy has been committed, therefore, the real point at issue is not, in fact, whether it has been committed in a certain manner, i.e. decently rather than indecently, but whether it has been committed effectively rather than ineffectively. Ridicule and sarcasm are comprehensible to a greater number of people, and are a different and more effective kind of attack on Christianity, because they are as much emotional as intellectual in character. If one really wants to rid oneself of the fear and guilt instilled by a Christian upbringing, – if one really wants to commit therapeutic rather than irrational blasphemy and from being an ex-Christian to become a non-Christian, – then a vigorous expression of one's emotional as well as of one's intellectual rejection of Christianity is necessary. It is not enough to deny in private, as an intellectual proposition, that God exists. One must publicly insult him.

This is perhaps a hard saying, and many ex-Christians who are not yet non-Christians, whether atheists, agnostics, humanists, rationalists, or even Western Buddhists, will undoubtedly shrink from the idea of offering indignity to the Power which they were brought up to revere – and fear. Some ex-Christian Western Buddhists, in fact, anxious to show their broadmindedness, not only



object to anyone criticizing Christianity but even go out of their way to speak well of it. Any attempt on the part of informed Eastern Buddhists, or less psychologically-conditioned Western Buddhists, to point out the shortcomings of Christianity, or defects in the moral character of Christ, or the absurdity of many Christian doctrines, or even the most obvious differences between Buddhism and Christianity, is met not with calm consideration of the truth of the matter but with accusations of "narrowmindedness" and "intolerance" and the assertion that the Christianity about which the critics are talking is not the "real" Christianity. Such "Buddhists" are still very much Christians at heart. Though attracted towards certain aspects of Buddhism, they are still afraid of the God in whom they do not believe, and not only shrink from the idea of offering him indignity but try to ingratiate themselves with him by speaking well of Christianity. Criticism of Christianity by Buddhists upsets them because they are afraid of being identified with it and thus incurring the wrath of the Almighty, and, perhaps, the displeasure of the secular powers that be. In seeking to suppress or neutralize such criticism they are, in reality, repressing tendencies within themselves which, as yet, they dare not admit into consciousness.

The individual has a right to blaspheme. He has a right to commit rational blasphemy because he has the right to freedom of speech, i.e. to the full and frank expression of his opinions, and he has a right to commit therapeutic blasphemy because he has the right to grow, i.e. to develop his human potential to the uttermost. One who was brought up under the influence of Christianity, – under the oppressive and coercive influence of theological monarchism, – and who as a result of that influence is tormented by irrational feelings of fear and guilt, has the right to rid himself of those feelings by openly expressing his resentment against the Power that bears the ultimate responsibility for their being instilled into him, i.e. by committing blasphemy. Christianity is not the only form of theological monarchism, of course. Judaism and Islam are also forms of theological monarchism and those who are brought up under their influence often suffer in the same way as those brought up under the influence of Christianity and have, therefore, the same right to blaspheme. At the beginning of this article we saw that the Committee Against Blasphemy Law, in deploring the Appeal Court's decision to uphold the convictions of Denis Lemon and Gay News Ltd for blasphemous libel, also expressed concern at the possibility of the blasphemy law being extended to cover religions other than Christianity. The religions which, in the persons of their official representatives, have so far shown most interest in such an extension, are Judaism and Islam. This is perhaps as one



might have expected. In the light of what has just been said, however, it is clear that it would be as wrong for the law of blasphemy to be extended to cover Judaism and Islam as it would be for it to continue to cover Christianity. There is also a practical difficulty in extending the law of blasphemy. Blasphemy is not the same thing in all religions, i.e. in all religions which recognize the possibility of such an offence. For Christianity it is blasphemy to deny the Divinity of Christ. For Islam it is blasphemy to assert it. Hindus are outraged by the slaughter of cows. Muslims are no less outraged if on the festival of Bakri-Id they are not allowed to slaughter cows. Obviously it would be impossible to extend the blasphemy law in such a way as to satisfy the contradictory requirements of all those religions that recognize the possibility of blasphemy or whose followers are capable of being shocked and outraged. In the pluralistic society that now exists in Great Britain the only equitable solution to the problem is not to have a law of blasphemy at all.

What the attitude of Buddhism is towards some of the more important issues raised by the *Gay News* blasphemy trial should now be clear. It should be clear that, so far as Buddhism is concerned, there is no such thing as blasphemy, and that so long as blasphemy remains a criminal offence Buddhists, like other non-Christians, do not enjoy complete freedom of expression in religious matters and are, in effect, penalised for their beliefs. For Buddhists in Britain, whether Eastern or Western in origin, it therefore follows that: (1) The law of blasphemy should be abolished altogether. It should not be extended to cover other religions. Buddhism itself does not, in any case, require the protection of any such law. (2) There should be a complete separation of Church and State. The Church of England should be disestablished. There should be no religious instruction (as distinct from teaching about the different religions) in state-run or state-supported schools and no act of religious worship at morning assembly. The sovereign should not be required to be a member of the Anglican communion – or indeed to belong to any Christian denomination, or even to any religion, at all. Reference to the Deity should be expunged from the National Anthem. (3) Blasphemy should be recognized as healthy, and as necessary to the moral and spiritual development of the individual, especially when he has been directly subject to the oppressive and coercive influence of Christianity or any other form of theological monarchism. Far from being prosecuted, it should be encouraged. If these suggestions are acted upon, some of the harm done by Christianity will be undone, Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike will be benefited, and society at large will be happier and healthier than it was in the Year of the Blasphemy Trial.



**Friends of the Western Buddhist Order**