

Misc.

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June 30, 1977.

Gentlemen,

You ask for my views on the Kirkup poem about which Mrs Mary Whitehouse is suing Denis Lemon and Gay News for blasphemy. I will try to answer your questions seriatim:

1. The poem is about the love of God - and, even more, our love for God - expressed in male homosexual imagery. Why such a form of expression? Because "it was the only way I knew". Christian legend is full of stories of the love of God being expressed in unorthodox ways: "The Juggler of Notre Dame" to quote but one example.

2. There is no "challenge" to Christian doctrine. "Challenge" suggests aggression; it would be hard to imagine any poem less aggressive. Nor is there any question of ridicule. This is a love poem, not a satire. Certainly the poem could be considered offensive; indeed it has offended, and I believe that a large majority of committed Christians - and a fair number of uncommitted - would find it acutely distasteful. Similarly, though myself lacking any specialised theological knowledge, I am not a bit surprised that Dr Packer has been able to attack it on these grounds. I question his use of the word "desecration"; but desecration is in the eye of the desecrator.

None of this, ~~xxxx~~ however, seems to be to the point. In a popular newspaper I should never have defended the publication of this poem, since it would have shocked the sensibilities of large numbers of innocent readers. But Gay News is exclusively directed at a specialised readership which is unlikely to be shocked; it will understand, and sympathise, and accept, the poem in the spirit in which it was unquestionably written. If Mrs Whitehouse reads it, she must expect to be offended, and I doubt whether this is the first time she has been. Personally, I find the bad taste bondieuserie on sale in all Catholic countries (in Lourdes I have seen rubber hot water bottles in the shape of the Virgin and Child) infinitely more nauseating - and they, unlike Mr Kirkup's poem, are conceived and marketed for gain rather than in the spirit of devotion.

3. See above. The question of the poem's literary merit once again strikes me as irrelevant; let me simply say that I find it sensitive, moving and sad.

4. It has certainly not moved me to any acts of violence - though Mrs Whitehouse's reaction to it very nearly did.

Finally, I take the liberty of enclosing a copy of a poem by Kingsley Amis which is included in the Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century Verse. I was glad to find it there; it is a good poem and it does not offend me in the least; the author is a close friend of mine and I admire him greatly. But it strikes me as a thousand times more blasphemous in spirit than is Mr Kirkup's, and far more insidiously undermining of Christian doctrine. It is, moreover, published in a collection intended for the general public, edited by one of our most distinguished living poets and bearing the stamp of our most venerable University. Yet no one, so far as I know, has thought fit to complain.

I enclose a curriculum vitae as you request. I should add that I am personally an agnostic - and a heterosexual.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Norwich', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

The Viscount Norwich.

P.S. I shall be available to give evidence on July 6 and