

# Sir Ian McKellen Hammers The Final Nail In The Coffin Of Blasphemy Law

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Sir Ian McKellen drew a final line under the blasphemy laws on Saturday, when he read the last work to be prosecuted for blasphemy at a celebratory event in central London.

Sir Ian read *The Love that Dares to Speak its Name* to a gathering of celebrities and parliamentarians at a party organised by the National Secular Society.

The poem, by James Kirkup, was published in *Gay News* in the early seventies and was the subject of a prosecution by clean-up-TV campaigner Mrs Mary Whitehouse. The paper's editor Denis Lemon was sentenced to nine months in jail, suspended. The judge said it was 'touch and go' as to whether Lemon would be imprisoned.

Last month, Royal Assent was given to the legislation that finally abolished the crime of blasphemous libel. Among those celebrating the event was Stewart Lee, the author of *Jerry Springer the Opera* that almost got the Director General of the BBC prosecuted for blasphemy when it was broadcast two years ago.

Also there was Nigel Wingrove, whose film *Visions of Ecstasy* was denied a certificate by the British Board of Film Classification on the grounds that it *might* be blasphemous. It remains banned to this day, although the BBFC has made it clear that it is willing to reconsider the film.

Lib Dem MP Evan Harris, who put down the amendment that eventually killed off the blasphemy law was guest of honour, along with Lord Avebury (previously Eric Lubbock MP), who has been a long-time campaigner against blasphemy.

Terry Sanderson, president of the National Secular Society, said: "The NSS has been trying to get rid of the blasphemy law for the whole of its 140 year history, so this was a big day for us. This event put the final nail in the coffin of blasphemy law in this country – although we will have to be vigilant that it doesn't rise from the dead, like some awful vampire, in some other form."

But even as the party was in full swing, news came through that a young man has been sentenced to death in Pakistan for alleged blasphemy. Terry Sanderson said that the fight against all forms of religious repression around the world was becoming increasingly urgent.

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