



Dr John Robinson, formerly Bishop of Woolwich, and author of the controversial 'Honest to God', discusses

OBSCENITY & MATURITY

and suggests that most decent people have yet to recognise that to disapprove is one thing but to prohibit is another...

CENSORSHIP IS, I BELIEVE, the next goal for liberal reform in "the civilised society" (the phrase of Mr Roy Jenkins). After a decade of some quite fundamental changes of law in the field of personal ethics—on suicide, capital punishment, homosexuality, abortion and divorce—literary censorship sticks out now like a sore thumb.

The unique thing about literary censorship, unlike the other forms of hidden censorship preventing voices being heard or facts exposed, is that it has behind it the full panoply of the law—what the recent Report of the Working Party on the Obscenity Laws set up by the Arts Council called "Big Brother wiggled and gowned on the judicial bench."

The survival of these laws (like the, mercifully obsolete, blasphemy laws) is a hang-over from the paternalistic society. In this society "mankind is under guardians," to use St. Paul's phrase. There are those who know best, who, in the name of decency and order, decide what it is good for the rest of us to read or to see and who are there to protect us, if necessary against ourselves.

It is only very lately that this conception of society has been widely questioned, and that, in the name of the "permissive" society. But this betrays its parentage in the very act of revolt. For who "permits" whom? Why, the guardians, of course—who graciously, grudgingly, or even thankfully, abdicate (like the Lord Chamberlain, the father-figure of English theatrical censorship, who recently made a dignified if hurried exit).

But, as Michael Keeling has

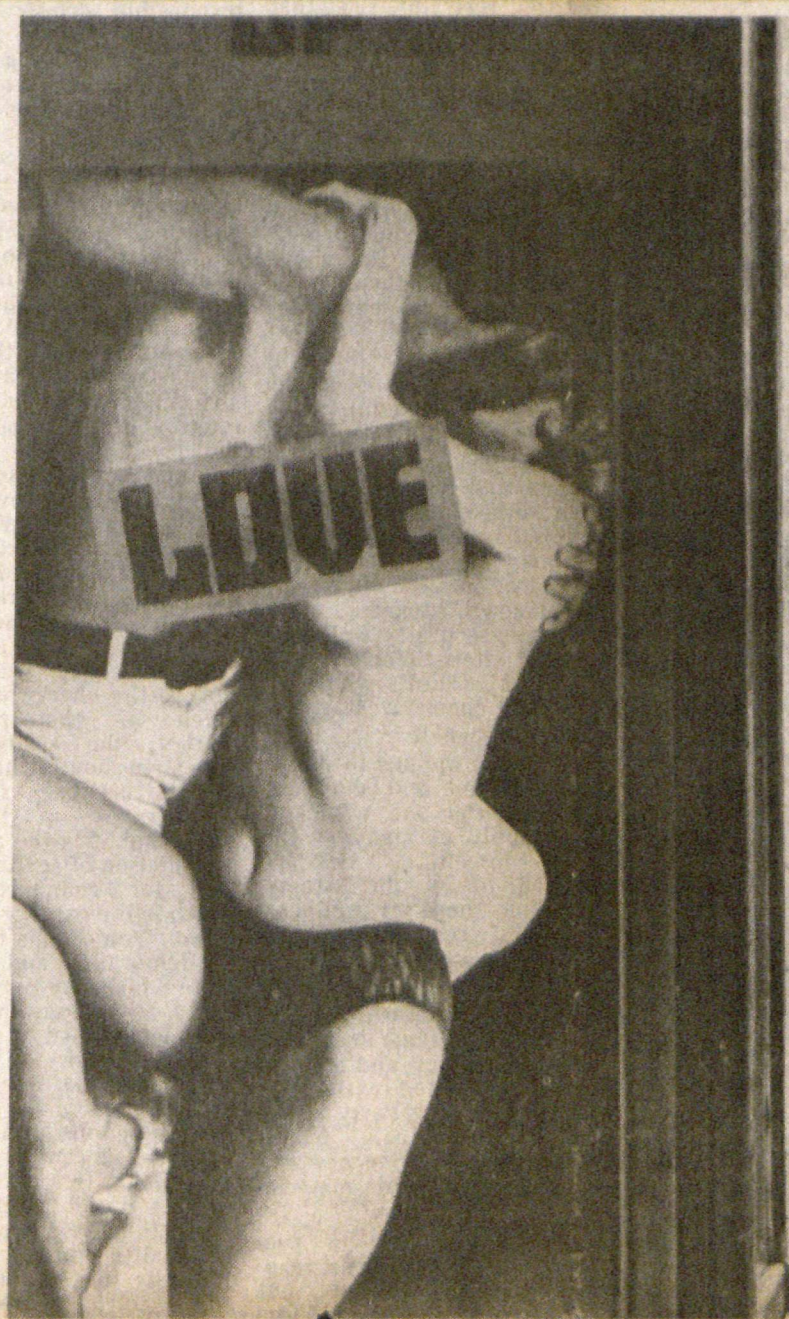
Dr Robinson, who is 50, was Bishop Suffragan of Woolwich from 1959 to 1969. He is now Dean and Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge.

recently put it in his book, "What is Right?", "the word 'permissive' suggests that there is a right inherent in society, or in the leading individuals in society, to exercise control over us and that they are failing in this duty, in as much as certain activities are 'permitted' which ought not to be 'permitted'. It suggests that the controls have slipped. So long as this suggestion can be made—and taken—seriously we have not begun to realise what the right relationship between ourselves and society is. It is not the business of society to control us. It is the business of society only to provide the basic civil liberties within which we can make our own moral decisions and discover our own possibilities for moral growth."

Yet the permissive society is a real advance on the paternalistic society. At least the permissive society, like adolescence, demands freedom. It does not create it and often indeed does not foster it. In fact it tends to smother it by massive new pressures, particularly towards teenage conformity. It is not easier for a young person genuinely to be free.

But at any rate it does not prohibit freedom; and by its inner logic it requires it, often beyond the strength of individuals and groups unaccustomed to it. Hence the casualties, which can be tragic (especially with drugs). No sane person would argue that there is not a place for a framework of law—and good law.

Nevertheless I believe the current backlash against the permissive society is retrogressive. I would urge that we must press forward from the paternalistic and the permissive society to the mature society, recognising that we have not reached it, yet seeing it as the target by which we should constantly be setting our sights. If we do not have such an aim,



Eroticism in the cinema... and indifference in a London street



we shall merely drift like an adolescent on the loose, or revert to a former bondage.

I should like to test out the implications of such a society by looking at a test case for it—the abolition of censorship.

This step has been boldly proposed in Britain by the Arts Council Report mentioned above. I believe its logic is unanswerable, and the Report itself is a model of lucidity and good writing. Predictably the Home Secretary made it clear that he was having none of it, and the prospects for its implementation in the foreseeable political future are dim. There is no doubt that we are not as yet a sufficiently mature society. But the Report will take its place in the honourable queue of rational statements that have apparently to be reiterated many times before the law on such subjects comes to be changed.

The heart of the difficulty is that obscenity is a word quite incapable of objective legal definition. Verdicts of judges and juries must therefore continue to be subjective, arbitrary and unfair—wielding censorship rather than implementing law. Nevertheless there are within this tangled field a number of moral distinctions to be made, and these are important for helping to discern and shape the attitudes of a mature society which is both free and responsible.

I believe it is relevant to distinguish rather carefully between the erotic, the obscene, and the pornographic.

THE EROTIC

IT CANNOT BE SAID TOO often in our sick, sub-Christian western society that the erotic is positively good—part of that creation which God saw and pronounced to be very good. There is nothing obscene whatever in the portrayal, however explicit, of the erotic as such. The erotic is something to be enjoyed.

Other civilisations, notably those of ancient Greece and India, have not found this difficult, and the phallic symbol, even in public, has not been regarded as obscene. Yet such is our fear of sex that if you adapted the advertisement "the Guinness sensation: enjoy it" to "the sex sensation: enjoy it"—particularly if you illustrated it—the indignation can be imagined. Yet to do it for the sheer joy of it, to sell nothing, would arguably be more moral than to use sex to export cars.

A reinstatement of the

genuinely erotic as a subject of beauty and delight seems to me to be one of the priorities of our society. And it is an area where the Church has reparation to make. For, as everyone knows, the Church has a shameful record of being anti-erotic. What everyone does not know, and what has to be stressed again and again, is that there is practically nothing of this in the authentic Hebraic strain of the Bible itself—as the Song of Songs shows and as every schoolboy searcher of the Old Testament must remember.

There is nothing anti-erotic about Jesus, who was certainly not known as a puritan, and by his fearless freedom gave women an entirely new acceptance in the ancient world. Nor is there, I believe, anything anti-erotic about St. Paul, who receives such a consistently hostile press at this point. Certainly he saw celibacy as his own vocation. But he never condemns sex as such. Indeed, he extends and glorifies in the Old Testament insight of carnal "knowledge" as a sacrament of union with the divine.

The idea that the two loves are exclusive and contradictory was later and pagan, however pervasive. Yet such is the damage it has done that merely to "induce erotic desires of a heterosexual kind" itself constitutes one of the tests of corruption, in the latest gloss on the Obscene Publications Act of 1964. This makes its repeal the more urgent. But there is, of course, a far more fundamental change to be achieved in our entire attitude.

Yet this change is hindered rather than helped by the persistent exploitation of the erotic in eroticism. This makes an "ism" of it, extracting it from the total personal relationship and proper intimacy in which it is beautiful, and playing upon it for its own sake. Any "ism" is in my judgment suspect because it fastens upon a perfectly valid part and then seeks to see the whole in terms of it, inevitably thereby distorting not only the proportion but the part. And when, like sex, it is such a powerful part, the temptation and the disbalance are the greater.

It has been said that you can sell anything by nudity. In fact, in the long run, this is questionable. An article in New Society on "The Sex Sell" concluded: "Sexy ads... fail to convince when they aren't related to products concerned with the female sexual persona. Sex is a very bad way of selling Müllsäcken aus Kraftpapier (strong paper refuse bags). It's quite a good

way, though, of selling sex." The purpose, commercially, of the nude female is that women should identify with it, not that it should appeal to men.

But advertising is not the only or indeed the main field for eroticism. The same article gave convincing figures for the surprisingly limited use of sex in the really big areas of commercial advertising. Eroticism in fact mainly sells itself—through books, magazines, films and records.

And it is important to get the record straight. There is nothing intrinsically evil about eroticism, as I shall maintain later that there is about pornography, although the one may shade imperceptibly into the other. Eroticism is a distortion, by isolation, of something good.

Let me illustrate the difference between the genuinely erotic and eroticism from the August issue of Playboy magazine. It contains some marvelous cine-photographic stills of Paula Kelly dancing completely in the nude, pubic hair and all. Nothing could be more beautiful and entrancing. Further on is a highly-posed picture of Debbie Hooper sitting cross-legged, thighs apart, with a crumpled bath-towel neatly arranged in the strategic spot. A beautiful girl again, but the effect is totally artificial and merely contrived to titillate. Further on again there is a whole warren of Bunnies in equally unnatural positions, including one of Kitty Tabor, balancing precariously on a railroad track and epitomising "the carefree spirit of the Detroit Playboy Club." Anything less genuinely carefree I find it hard to imagine.

I say this not to condemn but to distinguish. Playboy has, on the whole, done a liberating job in making the erotic acceptable in a pseudo-puritanical culture. Moreover, by combining the erotic with high-quality articles on politics, philosophy, theology and the rest, it has helped to counteract the isolation of the erotic which lies at the root of eroticism. And never, as far as I know, has it indulged undercover pornography by the singularly nauseous and hypocritical ruse, beloved of the English Sunday papers, of "exposing vice" in the unsullied name of virtue.

On the other hand, there is no doubt that it has been a powerful influence in promoting an "ism" which I am convinced rests on an "up-tight" view of sex, epitomised again in the look-but-no-touch Bunny. It has been said that the proper

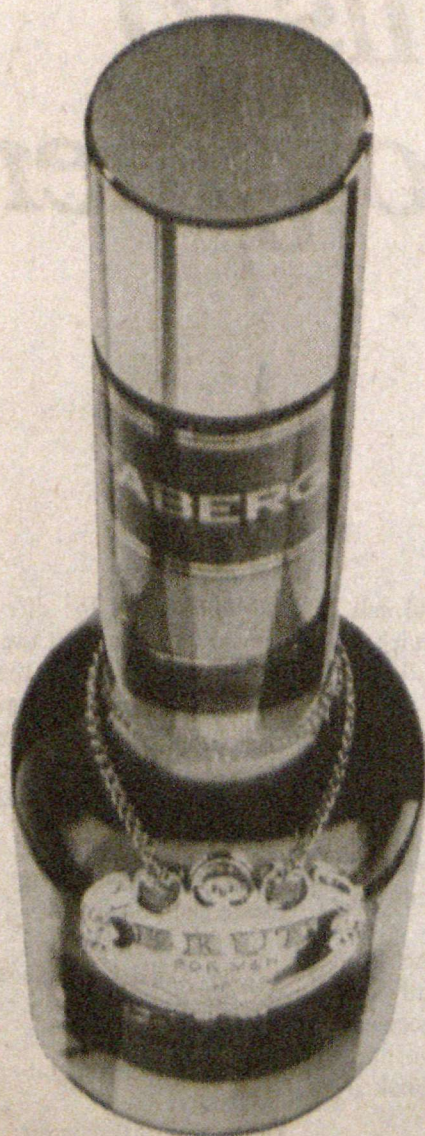
charge against Playboy is that it is anti-sexual. One need not go as far as that to recognise that by purveying sex confessedly as "entertainment for men" it has reinforced the abstraction of it from the total relationship of human beings in love in which alone it is whole and true. And this is the norm that we have constantly to move towards if we are going to create a genuinely mature society.

I have no compunction as a Christian in saying that we have in our generation to aim for a truly humanistic understanding of sex. (Humanism is another "ism" which makes a valid part, man, the measure of the

whole.) And this is a relatively recent possibility. We should recognise in fairness that the patristic and medieval fear and denial of eros belong to a world in which a truly human life was a very precarious achievement, constantly threatened by nature or the gods.

For most of human history, sex has been viewed alternatively as the god within or the animal within, a tempestuously powerful force acting upon men and women, whether from above or below. The Renaissance represented a bid of the human spirit to throw off this double domination, staking a claim for the autonomy of

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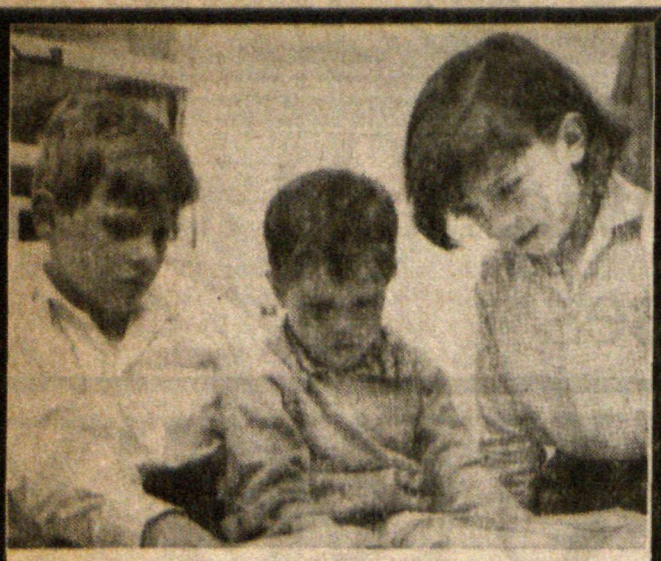
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OBSCENITY & MATURITY



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Love,
Muriel.

continued from preceding page

whole areas of life from super-natural or sub-human control.

The sexual area has been one of the last to win this freedom. This is largely because the mechanisms of understanding and control, physical and psychological, have not been available until the twentieth century, and are still very crude. It is an area demon-ridden with taboos and inhibitions which make cowards of us all. The liberation of sex, so that we are genuinely free in how we act and how we talk about it, is far from complete. But it is in sight—and it is being anticipated with the casualties we know.

In the first flush this liberation is a freedom from. Hence the assumption that "the sexual revolution" is simply to be equated with greater permissiveness. But if this were all there was to it, there would be no genuine revolution at all. It would just be one more swing of the historical pendulum between control and licence, Apollo and Dionysus.

But I am convinced that there is more than this. For the heart of the sexual revolution in our time is that potentially now we have within our grasp a freedom over sex, as over the rest of nature, undreamed of before. One aspect of this is indeed the runaway commercialisation of sex, under whose pressures and suggestions we are in so many ways less free.

But with it has come also the possibility of a vastly enriched area of human responsibility and control. Whether we have children—and soon we doubt their gender—is not to be left to nature or the gods. What we do about sex becomes increasingly a matter for deliberate personal choice.

And this is where, as a humanist, I want to come back on the naturalist. To justify sex—any sex—in terms of the "natural behavioural instincts" (in the words of an English imitator of Playboy) is a dismal sell-out. It is to refuse the revolution and decline its responsibilities. For the revolution demands that, whether we are Christians or not, we should re-think our attitude to sex not simply in terms of what is permitted ("how far" we go, or where we "draw the line"), but in terms of the quality of personal relationship.

It is the test of honesty to the relationship and of real fidelity to the whole person that matters. Sex can be fully personal, as opposed to animal, only in the context of

a tender, caring, responsible relationship. And it is this that eroticism undermines by detachment. Anything that works against this detachment is not only on the side of the angels, but, more importantly, on the side of integrated, mature, joyful, human living.

THE OBSCENE

BUT IT IS TIME TO MOVE on to our second category, from the erotic to the obscene. The first thing to be said here is that obscenity, as such, has nothing peculiarly to do with sex. It comes from the Latin *obscurus*, which is in origin a term of augury, meaning ill-omened. When Horace used the phrase "*anus obscurae*" it had no connection, as we might guess, with anal obscenity. It means "old hags" or "witches" of the sort that we meet in "Macbeth"; and their obscenities were the disgusting objects with which they fed their cauldron. Indeed the basic thing about obscenity is not, as the law asserts, its potential to "deprave and corrupt," which is extremely difficult to prove, but its undoubted capacity to disgust or offend.

But this, naturally, depends greatly on the subject and the circumstances. What some find repulsive others won't, and what is indecent, or unfitting, in some contexts could be perfectly "proper" in others. There are many (though mostly those who had not seen it) who apparently thought the film of "Ulysses" obscene. All I can say is that I found it extraordinarily beautiful and moving.

On the other hand, I remember an issue of the American magazine *Ramparts* with a collection of photographs of children savaged by the Vietnam war which I should have no hesitation in calling obscene. This does not in the least mean that I want to ban such photographs: I deeply desire people to be exposed to them, as there are some things on which our sensibilities ought to be shocked. And the English courts have made it clear that "shock and disgust" is in itself no offence, though in practice the criterion of obscenity offered to juries of "what is acceptable... in the age in which we live" comes close to saying it.

What does, however,

need to be said is that any person has a reasonable right not to be forced to be shocked. In other words, society has a responsibility here, as elsewhere, to respect privacy and enable people to be free. People should be protected, to some extent at least (absolutely it is of course impossible), from having things thrust at them in situations they cannot avoid which may be expected to cause them pain or nausea. What offends susceptibilities has changed and is changing constantly. But where there is reasonable likelihood of serious offensiveness it is proper that society should exercise restraint, so that people shall be free not to be damaged if they cannot take it.

Thus, I would argue that it was valid by the Street Offences Act to clear the English streets of prostitutes, even if it did mean "sweeping them under the carpet." For undoubtedly many people are disgusted and embarrassed by having to encounter them whether they like it or not. (This is quite different from prohibiting those who wish to seek them out.)

Equally it is valid by film classifications, television timings, and warnings before programmes to provide protection for children and others who may wish to avail themselves of it (though my experience suggests that children are pretty well able to look after themselves: it is often the adults who wish to protect themselves against embarrassment).

The same applies to public advertisement and shop displays, though one wishes it could apply to many of the other obscenities we are exposed to on the streets, including those of ugliness, noise and stench.

It is not generally realised that even the latest Danish legislation abolishing all censorship retains restraint on public display, and the proposed Bill drafted by the Arts Council Working Party would protect individuals both against public indecency and against unsolicited material by post.

No one should be prohibited from seeing or reading anything he wants; but equally no one should be forced to see or read anything he does not want. It would help to disarm reasonable fears of a pornographer's paradise (even if, on the Danish evidence, short-lived) to stress the requirement that no one need be compelled to share it.

THE PORNOGRAPHIC

THIS BRINGS US, FINALLY, to the hard core of the subject, pornography.

Pornography, as D. H. Lawrence insisted, is "doing dirt on sex" and this, as the name implies, includes anything that in written or descriptive form prostitutes it. Unlike the erotic, which is good, the pornographic is, by definition, evil and undesirable. The number of people it seriously corrupts is, I think, questionable. (What it undoubtedly does corrupt is sex.) We never appear to suppose that it might corrupt the juries we set up to vet it. Could a man refuse jury service on the ground that it was wrong of the community to threaten his corruption?

In fact persistent pornography appeals only to those already twisted or deprived in their relationships. Others, though they may find it titillating, will soon be sated and turn away in disgust. It has no power fundamentally to change their pattern of life, which has been set by emotional factors at a much earlier age.

The only serious form of public effect seems the very real possibility that playing on themes of sexual violence may add fuel to destructive desires that would otherwise remain socially harmless. This was argued persuasively by Pamela Hansford-Johnson in

her book, "Iniquity," on the Moors Trial. But even this is far from proven by evidence that a sociologist or lawyer could accept. And it still leaves open the question of what you do about it.

As the Arts Council Report points out, "Violence has been ubiquitous in the art, literature and Press of the civilised world for so long that censorship must by now be recognised as a totally inadequate weapon to combat it. Indeed laws available for the purpose including the Obscenity Acts are virtually never even invoked against it."

Nevertheless, pornography poses a real problem for a responsible society. As Lord Soper wrote in the excellent symposium "Does Pornography Matter?", edited by C. H. Rolph, "the work of personal redemption and the work of social redemption would be significantly advanced in an environment purged of pornography. . . . It chains those who produce it and those who indulge it to a quality of life that is both unworthy and inadequate."

I am inclined to think that its most pervasive and corrosive effects are not to be found at the extremes where the law might be invoked. The real corruption of a society's attitude towards sex sets in much earlier on, with all that suggests, arouses and plays upon an attitude to love, nudity, sexual gratification and experiment, which, to quote Lawrence again, is "trivial, cheap and nasty."

This is the charge against so much of the paperback market, the sex-magazines, the strip-shows, the suggestive advertising. It is not pornography in the legal sense, but it is the persistent exploitation of sexual stimulation for commercial gain which is the essence of prostitution. And it has the power to demoralise and to de-erect which any person, especially any young person, in our society needs a great deal of strength to withstand.

It is this that nourishes the understandable desire of most decent people to prohibit it. But most decent people have yet to learn that to disapprove and to prohibit are not the same thing. For prohibition is usually counter-productive. It feeds the problem rather than solves it—as the astonishing drop of 25 per cent in sex crime in one year after the permitting of pornography in Denmark provisionally demonstrates.

It is a malaise of Anglo-Saxon society that moralists tend to be prohibitionists. If you are not a prohibitionist, you are assumed to be lax and unconcerned for morals. Yet the question is fundamentally how to exercise responsibility in a free society. The attempt to deal with the evils of alcohol by prohibition, is, of course, the classic instance of the failure of prohibitionism to achieve the ends it most desires. But the principle applies in many spheres where the use of the law is much more limited than most people instinctively suppose when they see something of which they disapprove.

However unhealthy we may think pornography to be, I do not believe the function of the law is to prohibit it as such, nor to set itself up as the arbiter of what I may read or reject. The function of law in the last ditch (and it is the last ditch) is to protect freedom. And there are limits to which it can do this without having the opposite effect.

'I found the film Ulysses beautiful and moving'

It can to some extent protect persons against the exploitation of their erotic compulsions (for an exploited person is not free). It can to some extent protect them against forcible intrusion upon their susceptibilities (for a forced person is not free). And it can to some extent protect them against things that will result in their being treated as less than persons.

I have so phrased this last as to include the suppression of material likely actively to promote racial discrimination or prostitution or violence against the person, sexual or otherwise. But I would want to stress the publicly verifiable effect of action on other persons (or, in the case of drugs, for instance, on the person himself) and not simply the presumption by a judge or jury of a likelihood to "deprave and corrupt."

One of the greatest things society can do for a person is to help him to be free. It cannot make him free. This

must depend on his own choice. But to deprive him of the choice by prohibition is itself to deprive him, to treat him as less than a responsible person.

Society's own example in treating people as less than responsible by censorship can have the same effect as society's own example of taking life by capital punishment. The effect of public prosecutions (as of public executions) is, I believe, wholly bad. It was the action of the Director of Public Prosecutions that made "Lady Chatterley's Lover" pornographic for many. There is much that I would not wish to defend or encourage but which equally I think it wholly regrettable to proceed against by law. And I would take exactly the same attitude in regard to blasphemy.

I am sure that the Arts Council's Working Party was right in concluding that "the proper sanction for breaches of taste . . . should be social reprobation and not penal legislation." It would help to allay the fears raised by the rational arguments that it mobilised so beautifully if such an influential body could go on to suggest positive ways in which this reprobation might be channelled through the disciplines it claims to represent.

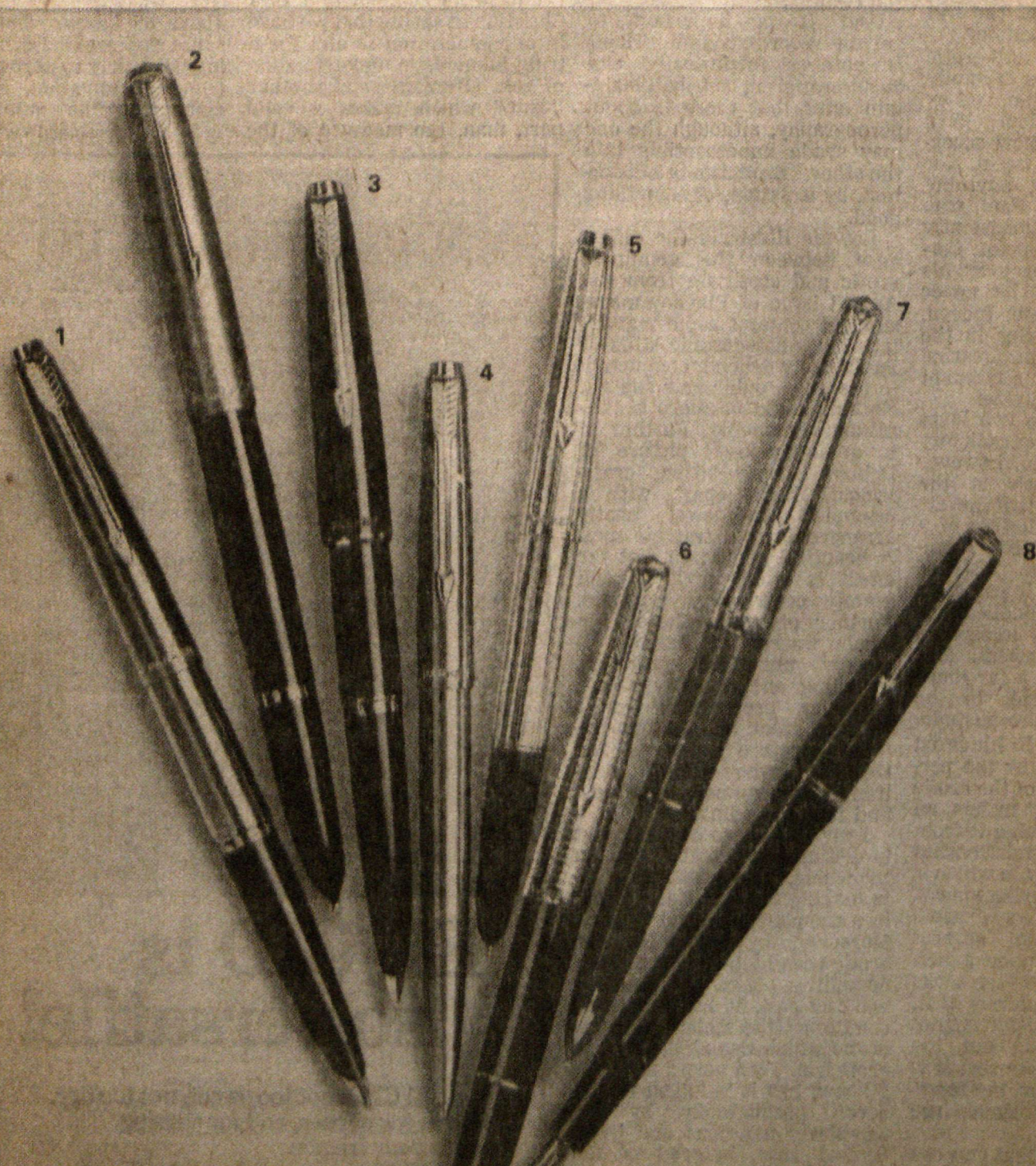
There is place for more voluntarily adopted professional codes to counter the so-called "conspiracy to corrupt." But standards must be exercised in the interests of personal freedom, not of anti-sexual repression. For the way a mature society functions is not, except in the very last resort, by suppression (that way lies a much worse death), but by encouraging values and relationships which will make people not want to do dirt on sex or anything else.

The responsibility of helping to shape such a society lies particularly on all those involved in publishing and the Press, advertising and the arts, as well as on the more direct influencers of individuals like parents and teachers, priests and psychologists. But for the creative exercise of any of these roles, freedom (short of the freedom to destroy freedom) is ultimately the most precious as well as the most dangerous commodity. We need the law to protect it rather than to prohibit it.

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Extracted from "Christian Freedom in a Permissive Society," by John Robinson, to be published by the SCM Press, price 21s., on January 20.

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