

A 60-second film of the Lord's Prayer and the illusion of secular neutrality. What is the role of religion in the public place?

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"...but in your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect," 1 Peter 3:15 ESV.

I recently decided to visit my local cinema. Hurrying along, I passed three advertising billboards near the entrance. The first displayed two bottles of lager clinking together with the words: "Post-match ritual". The third advert promoted a line of risqué lingerie, alongside a provocatively poised model. The middle advert posed the question: "Is this it?" with an Alpha Course logo.

I entered the cinema to the sound of seasonal music, took my seat and watched the adverts before the feature film. The adverts I consumed were free from religion or politics. Or were they?

According to the policy of DCM who control 80 per cent of cinema advertising, an advert is refused if in their "reasonable opinion" it constitutes "political or religious advertising".

It was reportedly on this basis that the Lord's Prayer film was refused. There are few who would argue that the advert is objectively offensive – indeed the film received a U rating from the BBFC and appears to have united public figures and MPs of all political parties, faiths and none with the prime minister calling DCM's decision 'ridiculous'.

The reality of neutrality?

However, despite the perceived offence of the Lord's Prayer, DCM's advertising policy arguably struggles to stand up to scrutiny. Corporate advertisers regularly reference Christmas in their cinema adverts order to boost the sale of their goods and commission special adverts well in advance to ensure 'we have the perfect Christmas'. In addition, regular cinema buffs may have noticed in passing that the venues are not averse to engaging in promotions, songs and screenings inspired and informed at least in part by Christmas. But according to the policy, advertising that "partially advertises any religion or belief or any part of any religion or belief" would amount to religious advertising and therefore shouldn't be carried.

Reflecting on the adverts I've personally consumed in the cinema, I've been mildly offended by views contrary to my own. This doesn't stop me from going to the movies. Amidst many seductive presentations of alcohol and fast food, I do remember being informed that: "There is only one life, live it" - an announcement directly at odds with various religions,

including my own. We kid ourselves if we think that such statements of 'non-belief', included in many advertising slogans and campaigns, are neutral. They are informed by secularism or forms of humanism, yet don't appear to have attracted the same level of scrutiny as the Lord's Prayer.

L'Oreal's "because you're worth it" slogan, uttered by celebrities, might appear to suggest that the value of a woman is somehow related to the amount of money and resources she is willing to invest in herself. Adverts are not created in a vacuum of neutrality. They are intrinsically value-laden, reflecting the social values of their creators.

Despite the objections raised about the potential offence that might arise from the Lord's Prayer, the very purpose of advertising seems to have been forgotten in the wider debate. Corporate advertising is an elaborate, multi-billion pound industry informed by psychology and advanced scientific research that aims to influence our thoughts and feelings – through humour, imagery, music, slogans and associations – in order to convince us that we have a compelling need for a given product or service that can be satisfied – but often at a hefty price. It's an important comparison when considering the potential harm or offence that might be caused by the Lord's Prayer or an invitation to an Alpha Course.

Authentic pluralism or selective secularism?

The issue underlying the Lord's Prayer debate is not so much religious liberty, but the very freedom of the public square itself. The stark choice before us is one of authentic pluralism or selective secularism that operates under the myth of neutrality.

Genuine pluralism provides a reflective public square in which diverse opinions are expressed, countered and respectfully critiqued where the right to disagree is jealously guarded.

If an advert is considered sufficiently respectful to be approved for placement on a public billboard outside a multiplex, why should it be denied entry through the door into the cinema? In a free and reflective public square, such equivalent adverts should, in my personal view, be permitted. Nearly any advert might provide some degree of potential offence to someone. It follows that I would expect to see adverts for other religious views. Depending on the advert, I may potentially feel slightly uncomfortable, but for me that is no different to what I currently experience when I consume adverts that seem to objectify and commoditise women in the pursuit of profit.

It would also entail advertising from political parties with whom I disagree. Having paid a considerable sum to watch a feature film, my personal preference would be to have no cinema adverts at all. But as there is a public space, it should reflect the legitimate pluralism of the outside world. As Giles Fraser points out, there is a rightful place for "peaceful religious speech" within such spheres and it is perhaps telling that Alpha Courses were previously advertised in national cinemas.

Contrast the above with DCM's policy that seeks to remove all 'religious advertising'. In all fairness to DCM they are not the first – and probably not the last – to adopt such an approach. Perhaps wary of becoming an arbiter of what was acceptable, they may have decided to exclude religious adverts.

However, by drawing the line they unavoidably positioned themselves as the arbiter of this public sphere – granting themselves the discretion of their own "reasonable opinion". DCM's space is one in which politics and religion are to be selectively controlled and excluded – by operation of their own policy. Terry Sanderson, president of the National Secular Society (NSS), agreed with DCM arguing the Church of England is "arrogant to imagine it has an automatic right to foist its opinions on a captive audience". Although the NSS should be commended for recent work in relation to the potential dangers of Extremism Disruption Orders, it's disappointing that Mr Sanderson fails to appreciate that the same logic might equally apply to advertisers or more importantly to DCM themselves who as a self-appointed censor deny adults the freedom to arrive at their own conclusions on the grounds of theoretical offence – a point initially recognised by none other than Richard Dawkins. Like any sphere of society, DCM's space is not neutral. Inevitably their adverts will contain values, opinions, assertions and ideologies, but with notable omissions. Without the presence of religion or politics as a counter-balance to other cinema adverts, all that remains is a hollow space of virtually unchecked consumerism.

As things stand, the Lord's Prayer may not be shown in UK cinemas this Christmas, but as a result of DCM's actions, the film may have gained an unprecedented global exposure without a single penny of advertising spend. Recognising that in a mature democracy we are constantly exposed to different opinions, Christians may wish to use this moment as an opportunity to engage in the debate about the role of religion in society and make the case for a genuinely plural public square within which we are able to lovingly and respectfully give a reason for the hope that prevails within us (1 Peter 3:15).

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