

14 August 1981

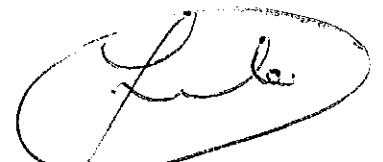
I have your letter of 30 July last and I was pleased to hear that you found the radio programme interesting.

It seems clear that you, or so I have assumed, did not agree with the decision to allow the film "Life of Brian" to be shown in this country. May I assume, also, that you did not see it? You do not say one way or the other nor do you indicate whether you are a regular cinema patron.

Firstly I must explain that my other censors and I are statutory officers appointed to exercise the powers and functions that are conferred on us by the Cinematograph Films Act, the legislation which deals with the censorship of films, but excluding television. The Act provides us with specific criteria and guidelines and it is these which must be used in making a decision on a film, not any personal choice of the individual censors examining the film.

Basically we are required to decide whether, in terms of the Act, a film is or is not likely to be injurious to the public good. It has been suggested that the phrase could be interpreted as referring to one person or to a small group of individuals but in our view, it is more correctly interpreted as being "the public as a whole" or "the community as a whole", or at the very least the largest part of that public. It is inevitable, therefore, that some of the decisions which we arrive at will be unacceptable either to individuals or to groups of individuals whether they are for more restrictive censorship or for less restrictive censorship or for no censorship at all. We are well aware that we cannot please all the public all the time and probably even some of the time.

In the case of "Life of Brian" the number of letters received was immaterial since many parroted the views or comments expressed by others, both here and overseas, but without any real knowledge of the true content of the film. Even if I had received no letters or even double the quantity I still would have been obliged to make my decision

A handwritten signature in black ink, enclosed within a large, hand-drawn oval. The signature is cursive and appears to be the name 'Lula'.

on the film in terms of the legislation and not on the basis of any mail that might or might not arrive. Similarly if I received a large quantity of mail in support of a film but in terms of the Act I considered the film was injurious to the public good, it would be banned. Letters, in themselves, are not necessarily conclusive evidence of the attitudes and opinions held by the community at large. They may give some indication but they must be evaluated against other relevant factors and particularly the laws of censorship.

In claiming that the film was offensive many writers and critics claimed that it was blasphemous or sacriligious, a profane parody or mockery of the life and death of Jesus Christ, a burlesque in bad taste, denigrating to the Jewish race. Whilst it is correct that the film was set in what are generally called "Biblical times" and that it depicted events similar (but only up to a point) to those contained in the Bible, it was basically a satirical film or perhaps a coarse farce along the lines of an overdone type of University revue. The film tended to expose and send up the gullibility and the cupidity of people, lampooning them and their hypocritical attitudes. It did not, despite the claims made, mock or debase Jesus Christ or his teachings nor did it denigrate the Jewish race.

However, since the film had been the subject of controversy, and before making a final decision I took the opportunity of consulting other people, as I was legally entitled to do, with a view to obtaining other opinion and comment. Without exception, this cross-section of people, which included members of the clergy who could and did speak with some authority, did not find any reason why the film could not be shown. It is fair to say that not every person found the film to his or her liking or taste but all agreed that in terms of the law, the film could not be refused a certificate of approval. My staff and I had arrived at a similar decision, independently, and subsequently a decision was made to approve the film.

I fully appreciated the fact that depending on the strength of their religious convictions, some people could be offended by the film but in our evaluation of it and having regard to what I have said earlier in this letter, the decision was an appropriate one.

You question the need for censorship? Personally speaking and as the Chief Censor I am quite sure that the day has not yet arrived when the need for some form of control has disappeared. Despite your contention not all things are shown in the films and not all films which are submitted to this office are approved. I would agree that there is a more liberal attitude as to what is acceptable as "screen fare" by the majority of the public but I know of no proposal to have the present controls removed, nor do I see any moves elsewhere in the world to take a similar course of action. There seems to be the distinct possibility that in some countries there may be more stringent measures imposed to control what is shown by way of visual "entertainment".

I trust that I have given you some insight into the workings of this

office and that I have answered the questions which you raised.  
If not please write again.

Thank you for your comments.

Yours sincerely

(B C Tunncliffe)  
Chief Censor of Films