

25 March, 1980

Rt. Hon. W.E. Rowling M.P.,
Leader of the Opposition,
House of Representatives,
WELLINGTON.

Dear Mr. Rowling,

I refer to your letter of 24 March 1980 concerning the film "MONTY PYTHON'S LIFE OF BRIAN."

It is correct that the film has been approved for screening, the classification limiting it to those persons who are 16 years of age and over i.e. an R16 certificate of approval.

Prior to the submission of the film my staff and I had had the opportunity of reading comments by overseas reviewers and members of the clergy but at that stage, and like ourselves, not one of the correspondents who wrote requesting that the film be banned had any personal viewing knowledge of the film. Since the film has not yet been released for public showing the same situation still applies.

There can be no doubt that the theme and the style and manner of its presentation could be likely to give offence to some people, particularly the religiously sensitive, and to some sections of local communities, but the question which my staff and I must consider is, whether in terms of the Cinematograph Films Act 1976, the film is, or is not likely to be injurious to the public good. Many of the writers who have complained to me prior to and after the submission of the film have specifically referred to Section 26(2)(d) of the above Act, and have requested that I take action solely on the criterion referred to therein to ban the film. No doubt correspondence you have will contain similar references as well as references to the reported remarks of overseas critics of the film. However Section 26(2)(d) is only one part of the whole sub section (a photocopy of the whole section is attached) and in my view

a decision based on that criterion alone would not be tenable in law. It is as you will appreciate the whole sub section containing all the criteria, as well as other relevant sections which my staff and I must take into account when making any decision to approve or reject any film.

You will be aware, too, of the various terms which correspondents have applied to the film. Since I have had the opportunity of seeing it and on more than one occasion, I am satisfied that it is not blasphemous, or sacriligious, nor is it a parody on the life of Christ. It may be argued that it is in bad taste, but this is a factor, which in terms of the law I am not required to, and cannot take into account.

Whilst it is true that the film is set in what ~~is~~ are generally called "Biblical times" and that it depicts events similar (but only up to a point) to those contained in the Bible it is basically a satirical film, or perhaps a coarse farce, along the lines of an overdone type of university revue. Despite the claims which have been made it does not in our view mock or debase Jesus Christ or his teachings, nor does it denigrate the Jewish people. Jesus is seen only on one occasion and that is in relation to his preaching the Sermon on the Mount, his voice being heard indistinctly beneath the clamour and the arguing of the people in the immediate forefront of the scene. There is no attempt to have the inept and bewildered character Brian emulate the miracles of Christ nor is there any attempt to re create the Last Supper or the betrayal of Christ and his specific crucifixion. Admittedly there is a crucifixion sequence, but from my understanding and reading this form of torture and death was in common use during the times depicted.

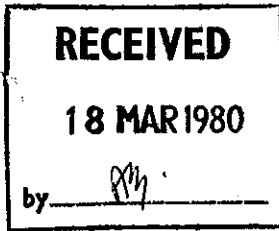
The film tends to expose and "send up" the gullibility and the cupidity of people, lampooning them and their hypocritical attitudes, but as I indicated earlier it does not do, in our view, what some critics and some writers have claimed.

However since the film had been the subject of controversy overseas, and before making a final decision, I took the opportunity of consulting other people, as I am 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 authority, did not find any reason why the film could not be shown. Since this view coincided with that held by my other censors and myself the film was approved with the classification I referred to earlier. It is fair to say that not everyone who saw the film found it to his or her liking or taste, but all agreed that in terms of what had to be considered the film could not be banned.

I am well aware that there will be criticism of this decision, but in terms of all the criteria specified in the Act there was in our view no justification for refusing the film a certificate of approval. Having said that I would like to think that some of the people who have opposed the showing of the film would now take the opportunity to see it and weigh up their earlier comment against what they see. They may not like what they see, but I feel sure that if they make a fair and balanced assessment of it in true Christian spirit they may be prepared to revise their earlier remarks.

Yours faithfully,

(B.C. Tunncliffe)
Chief Censor of Films.



4/20/80
Leader of the Opposition,
House of Representatives,
Wellington.
Telephone 736 025

14 March 1980

Mr D.C. Tunnickliffe,
Chief Film Censor,
7/9 Walter Street,
WELLINGTON

Dear Mr Tunnickliffe,

I have had considerable correspondence from people objecting to the screening of the film "The Life of Brian" that I understand has recently been authorised for viewing in New Zealand.

I have no first hand knowledge of the film but it is said to be offensive to Christians and Jews among others.

I would be grateful for your comments so that I may reply to my correspondents.

Yours sincerely,

A large, stylized handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "W.C. R. H." with a large flourish at the end.