

Gruen and the question of religion

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One of the most interesting episodes, but also the most irritating, of Gruen, the TV show on the ABC that explores advertising was Episode 8 in the latest series (and you may be able to watch on IVIEW). The focus was on examining advertising about marriage in the context of the debate on 'marriage equality', and the then proposed idea of a plebiscite on marriage and thus more and publicly-funded advertising.

What was fascinating and unique for the ABC in particular, was that it actually showed adverts in favour of traditional marriage, which is actually true marriage equality: marriage between a woman and a man in which a woman and a man equally agree to commit to each other for life and to the exclusion of all others.

Secondly there was open discussion of the politics of advertising on both sides of the debate. It was a program that made me uncomfortable in terms of their supposedly enlightened critique of Christian adverts, and yet I found it intriguingly illuminating, because most of the panel and probably nearly all of the audience was openly supportive of marriage revisionism and thus condemnatory and derisive toward the Christian advertisements. It was illuminating to hear the panel members sometimes make fair and almost understanding comments. Todd Sampson made some of the most intriguing comments, including stating that adverts about motherless families make the best adverts [in an emotional sense], but they are wrong, because he argued that there was no evidence proving that children of gay parents are better or worse off, except that they are

more tolerant. He is quite incorrect of course on his first point, but research in this area is very complex due to the poor and often biased statistical samples, and many of the wider issues are not considered. Perhaps copies of David van Gend's book *Stealing from a Child: the injustice of 'marriage inequality'* would have been a helpful resource for use in this wider discussion, especially given the advertising it has received. I thought that the most interesting question came from fellow panellist Russel Howcroft who asked Todd Sampson "What's the 'Yes' campaign that promotes fear?" Sampson answered by referencing the debate on a proposition to endorse traditional marriage in one state in the USA. (Note he talks about 'Yes' here in the context of YES being the progressive option).

"Here's what they learned in California - (from an advertising perspective) that the Yes side has to be very careful not to alienate. They have to include the middle. So as soon as they start alienating or get aggressive with it, they will lose the middle which will then float undecided into the No. And what they need to do is focus it positively on what it is actually about, which is not gay marriage, it's about marriage."

This is not the first time that Gruen has considered religion in a defined way. After all, our churches advertise, especially in the context of community and welfare services, and most denominational publications rely on advertising revenue for their overall budgets. ACCatalyst is unique in that it does not have advertising. Thank you to all our members who donate to help keep this arrangement.

In 2010, the then named The Gruen Transfer considered religion. It was promoted with the blurb: "Atheism's on the rise in Australia. In fact, religion appears to be a brand under threat. Yet few of its branches seem to advertise. Or do they? This week's The Gruen Transfer rounds up religious ads ..., from the deeply spiritual to the deeply disturbing."

The programme centred around Christianity and churches, with a

focus on the Jesus All About Life Campaign. It was again an illuminating discussion, highlighting how some

significant figures in advertising see religion as a brand with different products. If you would like to read more about this see my two articles on the ACC website at: www.confessingcongregations.com/resources/item/the-gruen-church/

And an article in the context of the idea of the 'emergent church', considering similarities with how The Gruen Transfer has developed: www.confessingcongregations.com/resources/item/gruen-transfiguration/

In terms of advertising and showing some of the Christian adverts and critique, I also draw readers' attention to the ABC Four Corners program 'For Better or Worse: How the personal has become political in the fight over same-sex marriage' (10th October 2016) as this also played some of the adverts, mainly in order to critique them. This episode was also of interest for the interview with Archbishop Julian Porteous, a keynote speaker at the 2016 ACC National Conference. Four Corners had another angle in their program – purporting to show both sides of the politics of the debate, though of course this did not mean 'news or reporting equality', and the sarcasm could even be detected in some of the reporting comments, illustrating a general and sad trend in news journalism toward advertorial and promotion of views. Why is the side in favour of traditional marriage portrayed as anti-marriage, when it is actually pro-marriage? Perhaps this actually links into Todd Sampson's comment more than one would like to think, and for me illustrates that the debate is far more about the revision of marriage than 'marriage equality'.

