

Woking: equal treatment vs. religious privilege

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This week, The National Secular Society launched legal action against Woking Borough Council over its policy of offering free parking to worshippers, while charging others.

Woking Borough Council, like [Bideford Town Council](#) before it, has come out fighting. Woking Council's chief executive, Ray Morgan, told BBC radio that this was because the council believes people should not have to "pay to pray". "We take a view that those people who worship... have a special role in our society", he said.

The council is naturally keen to encourage people who contribute to the community in some way. That's a laudable aim. The question is: why does Woking insist on bringing religious belief into it? Religion doesn't have a significant role to play in public life, people do. Of course people of faith contribute to society, but so do non-religious people. Treating all churchgoers with privileged status indicates that Woking values them and their activities above other members of society, and that's just not good enough.

If local authorities want to reward people who 'do good' in society, then fine, but why not target those that actually do good and provide some sort of public service? Where is the public service in worshipping?

Mr Morgan points out that Christians are out on Woking's streets on a Saturday night acting as 'street pastors', helping people who've had a few too many drinks to get home safely. If the council considered it an effective use of public money to give free parking to 'street pastors' so that they can hand out flip flops to revellers to help them on their merry way, I don't think the NSS would have an issue with that.

What we do have an issue with, is over [£53,000 of public money](#) (pdf) being spent annually on privileging one small section of society — religious worshippers — above others, for no legitimate reason.

Woking concedes its actions are discriminatory, but claim they are lawful because providing free parking to worshippers is a "proportionate means of meeting a legitimate aim." However, even in [their own legal advice](#) (pdf), its counsel states: "What I have struggled with in this case is what the legitimate aim is?"

Woking insists worshipping promotes 'social inclusion'. But what it fails to recognise is that social inclusion is fostered through a range of activities; religious worship is just one of those. An [Equality Impact Assessment](#) (pdf) commissioned (and then largely ignored) by Woking, made clear that other activities in which people partake while parking on Sundays promote inclusion. It stated:

"The Town Centre is not seen by non-religious groups as solely offering a commercial and retail experience. As an illustration, carers balancing home, work and their caring responsibilities often find Sunday a convenient day to relax by visiting the Town Centre as other family members who work may be around to provide some respite. Moreover, lone parents balancing childcare, work,

commuting, and the school run may find Sunday the best day to shop, and for disabled residents who want to visit the Town Centre, shop and have a meal with other family members or friends who may be working in the week, Sunday is often the most convenient day.

Thus Sunday for non-worshippers accommodates flexible working patterns and fits with the rhythms of family life. This is seen as being as important as religious observance to building and maintaining the social as well as the economic fabric of communities. It is seen as important to community cohesion in Woking, and to supporting diverse family values and family structures.

Therefore, in the same way as the church in Woking is seen as fulfilling an important community and social integration function, the discourse on parking charges it is argued, also needs to be expanded to take account of diverse lifestyles and secular activities that also enhance social integration. Along with church activities, those activities are also seen as contributing to the dynamism of the Town Centre, to its social milieu, and to its cohesion."

So there you have it. There is no legal defence for 'direct discrimination' which we believe Woking's policy amounts to, but even if the discrimination is indirect, Woking's defence looks a little shaky.

The public response to this campaign has been positive, even the [Daily Mail article](#) was balanced and the comments beneath it broadly supportive. But as with any campaign to remove religious privilege there are detractors. The Christian thinktank Theos [suggested](#) there was more important stuff to be getting on with. And there is, like removing self-serving Bishops from the House of Lords, advocating a secular approach to education, and exposing the human rights implications, particularly for women, of accommodating sharia law in our legal system. We are focusing on all of these issues, and many more, but that doesn't mean we have to turn a blind eye to other examples religious privilege where we find it – however much some would prefer us to.

But on this issue, some Christians are clearly with us. One local Christian has [commented](#) that she finds exemption from car parking charges to attend church "very un-Christian." She rightly points out that local authority funding is desperately needed to support the most vulnerable in society and suggests "the more ardent free car parking supporters might benefit from re-reading the Bible and thinking if this attitude is really compatible with their faith". "Are these churches now so feeble they have to take money from the poor to boost church attendance?" she asks.

We know this campaign won't change the world, but we do hope it will serve as another blow to the assumption that religion needs and deserves special privilege.

Ray Morgan has promised the NSS can get free parking too if we come to Woking and provide some public benefit. I think establishing the principle of equal treatment, regardless of religion or belief, actually does provide some public benefit – but we won't hold our breath for a free parking permit in the post.

Stephen Evans

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