

A cereal offense

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [August 16, 2000](#) issue

General Mills recently tucked a CD-ROM containing the Bible into 12 million cereal boxes and then had to issue profuse apologies for having done so as it withdrew the offensive inclusions. GM pleaded not guilty: “we didn’t know it was loaded” with scriptures, they said. “A flat-out lie,” says the CD-ROM packager, who knows, as we do, that the cereal-buying public became a late-test market.

It included enough customers who protested. And when they did, GM rushed to declare, “It is the company’s policy not to advance any particular set of religious beliefs.”

General Motors, General Foods and General Electric and all of the other Generals would have done the same kind of withdrawing and apologizing. They know what a pluralistic society and a public are, and they know what a bottom line means.

So we learn again that what effectively keeps God and Bible out of the public zone is *precisely* the free enterprise, laissez-faire, God-designed, capitalist market system to which we Bible-believers are devoted. The Supreme Court doesn’t allow us to do in the public sphere what General Mills did in the private. We aren’t allowed to tuck biblical CD-ROMS into public school textbook packets, or make and post graven images of the Bible’s prohibitions against graven images (read: Ten Commandments) on courtroom walls, or put baby Jesus figures on court house lawns.

Who is it who complains about this prohibition? Who sees us slouching toward Gomorrah because of a “policy not to advance any particular set of religious beliefs”? *Precisely* those who say that all would be well if the government would match the free enterprise, laissez-faire, God-designed, capitalist market system to which we Bible-believers are devoted.

No Supreme Court tells the General Mills people they can’t do what they did, or the Marriotts not to tuck the Book of Mormon into their hotel room dresser drawers. No law says that advertisements have to be purely secular—except the law of supply

and demand. No one says that advertisers have to design messages that show no hint that our society was ever touched by Judeo-Christian (whatever that is) values (whatever they are). Businesspeople all simply know what the Supreme Court majority also knows about us.

It's a free country, and there is enormous room for the "free exercise of religion" even in the public sphere. The only *places* where we citizens fight over the subject are court house lawns and court house and classroom walls. The only *times* we fight about religion have to do with prayers and pluralism when the school bell rings or the football game is about to begin. By the way, you *can* learn about the Bible, in literature and history classes in public schools, which makes them more friendly to what is Judeo-Christian than is the private enterprise zone.

This is a nation in which fewer and fewer parents send their children to Sabbath and Sunday schools and other places where they could get a "particular set of religious beliefs." Yet we fight over whether God and the Bible belong in the public sector. This suggests that those fights are not about religion but about politics. About who wants privilege or monopoly and who gets squeezed out or trampled on. About who idolizes and who challenges customs left over from "pre-pluralist" America.

Thanks to General Mills for wasting 12 million nice biblical CD-ROMS to teach us this valuable lesson. Cheerio!