
AUSTRALIAN CULTURE & CONTEXT ASSIGNMENT

MOORE THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE ~ DIPLOMA OF MINISTRY

CANDIDATE: **JODIE C. McNEILL**

SUBJECT: Australian Culture & Context

TITLE: Choose and briefly describe a theme/aspect of Australian culture which has caught your attention.
Explain what insight into Australian culture your reflections on this matter reveals.
In the light of the above, explore briefly the theological implications/perspectives of your reflection with a view to the ministry of teaching God's word.

Aspect chosen: **Australian humour, with particular reference to the recent Toyota Hilux 'bugger' ad** available on the Internet at <http://www.televisioncommercials.com/tvc/tvc.asp?page=1880>.

NO OF WORDS: 1026

DATE DUE: Friday, 18 June 1999

DATE SUBMITTED: Friday, 18 June 1999

*'Humour can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing
dies in the process'... E.B. White*

ONE OF THE FUNNIEST TELEVISION COMMERCIALS to appear for some time is the so-called Toyota 'bugger' ad, receiving almost universal praise for its humour. In this assignment, I intend to analyse this ad, and try to discern what makes it so funny. Then, I will try to establish what this tells us of Australian culture, and consider the implications of this reflection upon the ministry of teaching God's word.

THE TOYOTA 'BUGGER' AD

The main idea behind this ad is that the Toyota Hilux is more powerful than expected. As a result, when the farmer uses it to fulfil various functions on his farm, it inevitably works *too* well. In the first scene, his attempt to delicately straighten one fence post goes wrong, forcing every post to the horizon over, in a domino-like fashion. In the second scene, the attempt to tow a tractor results in the front axle being ripped off. In the third scene, the stump he is trying to pull from the ground is catapulted, destroying a chook shed when it lands. In the fourth scene, the attempt to pull a cow out of a ditch ends up with a pained 'moooo' from the now injured cow. In the final scene, the car accelerates into the distance, which causes his airborne cattle dog to miss the tray and fall in the mud, and his wife's full clothes line to be sprayed with mud.

WHAT MAKES IT SO FUNNY?

Yet, whilst this comic chain of events sounds reasonably funny, what makes it such a hilarious commercial? I have identified three elements.

The first is the obvious slapstick elements of the commercial. The creators have cleverly depicted unfortunate situations in a hilarious way. This is probably best demonstrated with the dog's comic utterance when he falls in the mud.

The second is the understated response of the farmer. When his repeated misfortunes occur, he never appears shocked. Rather, his reaction is to simply wince and utter the phrase 'oooh, bugger'. He appears as a man who has been through the hardships of life, and is almost unshakeable.

The third is the repeated use of the word 'bugger'. In our present culture, this word still has swear-word status, yet its offence is probably almost gone. Nonetheless, to replace the word in the commercial with a non-swear word would certainly remove the comic element of the farmer's reaction.

WHAT DOES IT TELL US ABOUT AUSTRALIAN CULTURE?

These three elements provide a helpful insight into Australian culture, in particular humour.

The first element shows our willingness to laugh at other peoples' misfortunes. The success of shows such as 'Australia's Funniest Home Videos' further demonstrates this fact. Yet, whilst this is a clear element of our humour, it is by no means limited to Australian humour, since much of the material of the "bloopers" genre originates in the United States. Nonetheless, it is still telling of the Australian coping mechanism. Our ability to laugh at others, including ourselves, provides us with a means of survival in a world that rarely sees things turn out as expected.

The second element, the understated response, is very telling of our humour. Whilst the exaggerated antics of Jim Carrey will still get laughs from an Australian audience, it is the dry, understated wit of comedians like Paul Hogan that we most genuinely relate to. Furthermore, this element of understated reaction to hardships is an integral part of our culture. As a people who live in a land of droughts and flooding rains, attempting to reap the fruit of the land in adverse situations,

under-reaction is our best means of coping. As Mel Brooks has said, 'Humour is just another defence against the universe'.

The third element, the swearing, betrays the larrikin element in the Australian psyche. Whilst swearing is a consistently fruitful comic device throughout the world, Australians in particular find this funny. Perhaps this is related to the egalitarian illusion of our society, where every Australian feels that they are like the bloke on the construction site, with his unashamed tongue and Stoic outlook. In fact, the country setting appeals to the traditional view of the Aussie on the land, a person that many people would be pleased to associate with, yet in reality, have little or no dealings with.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE MINISTRY OF GOD'S WORD

Humour is a powerful and persuasive device. When a person uses humour well, they have the ability to both disarm the defences of the listener, as well as authenticate their words. This is true both for the preacher behind the pulpit and the pastor behind a coffee table.

However, successful humour tends most of the time to be a skill that is caught not taught. To be funny is to have a deep and subconscious understanding of the mind of the culture. Thus, a minister who knows what is funny to his or her culture is a minister who knows how his culture thinks.

So, are there specific elements learned from this commercial that can provide us with ways to communicate, and in particular be funny?

Well, this ad certainly reminds us that Australians love hearing stories about funny things that go wrong to other people. This is especially the case when the teller is the victim. Yet, like the farmer on the ad, the victim needs to be undramatic in his or her reaction to the adversity. Both egalitarianism and Stoicism are attractive elements to the Australian listener.

We also learn that swearing is funny. The use of foul language may not be especially wise in most if not all ministry contexts, yet it does show that the larrikin element is still alive and well. It is difficult to know just how to apply this to our teaching of God's word, except to alert us to the fact that we are not using a tool that the public finds funny. So, we must realise that we cannot necessarily complete fully with secular stand-up comics. However, if there is some way in which we can use the larrikin element in our storytelling or preaching, then it is likely to be well received.