The Construction of an Australian Saint

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The paper is part of a larger PhD study entitled Sainthood in Australia - Mary MacKillop and the Print Media. The beatification of Mary MacKillop by Pope John Paul II in 1995 was a significant event in Australian history. This event led many reporters in the popular press to write about saints. This paper focuses on political cartoons featuring Mary MacKillop as examples of media texts to be analysed.

Using a framework based on sociology of knowledge and critical discourse analysis from the work of Norman Fairclough, the study looks at various levels of sociocultural practice. The dialectical relationship between media texts and society/culture is examined: media texts are seen to both reflect and contribute to changing cultural values and identities. The result is an example of what Mannheim terms sociological change of function: the construction of an Australian version of a saint.

Introduction

While Australians may have many heroes, they only have one official home grown saint. Mary MacKillop, born in Melbourne in 1842 and died in Sydney in 1909, is the only Australian to have been formally beatified by the Catholic Church. The visit by Pope John Paul II to Sydney in January 1995 for this occasion prompted many journalists to explore the nature of saints and sainthood.

Two years after her beatification, on the day when the Federal Budget was to be presented in Canberra in 1997, *The Advertiser* in South Australia ran the political cartoon illustrated in figure 1.

While the characters and subject were topical, I found it fascinating that Mary MacKillop rated a mention. The representation by the print media of the notion of sainthood in general and Mary MacKillop in particular is one which is the subject of my current research for a PhD at the University of South Australia.

The way that journalists report on religion and religious matters has been considered by others such as Henningham (1995:63-77) who described a national survey of journalists in 1992, focussing on their religious background and linking this to observed behaviours. Hutch (1996:53-59) provided an analysis of the way some journalists reported on the Pope's visit to Sydney in 1995 and discussed the distinction between what he termed "implicit" and "explicit" religion.

Figure 1: **The Advertiser** *13 May 1997*

While covering the same event as Hutch, my particular focus is on the ways that political cartoonists have constructed their version of sainthood within the Australian context. Through a consideration of the social conditions occurring at the times these ideas were generated, and identification of the values ascribed to Mary MacKillop, I believe it can be shown that knowledge about saints previously held by one group, the Catholic Church, has now become part of the general body of knowledge in Australian society. In this paper, I will be focussing on a sociological interpretation of the political cartoons: I will not be attempting to draw any links between this and any formal or informal Australian spirituality. This will be the subject of later research.

Background

While the term 'saint' is used by many churches, it is only the Catholic Church which has an organised system for determining who will bear the official title of saint. Until recent times in Australia, 'saint' had been limited to a holy person born in another place (mostly in Europe) whom Catholics had been taught to venerate.

This situation was changed when, on Wednesday January 18 1995, Pope John Paul arrived in Sydney to pay tribute to an Australian woman. The purpose of his visit was the Beatification of Mary MacKillop, a woman born in Melbourne in 1842 to Scottish immigrant parents.

Mary MacKillop (1842-1909) was an Australian Catholic woman who began a religious congregation called the Sisters of St Joseph to educate and assist the

poor, especially those in isolated and rural circumstances. Her single-minded pursuit of the call she believed to be from God led her to face and conquer great difficulties, including excommunication for a time from the Catholic Church. An examination of her life by Vatican authorities led to her being declared Australia's first saint in the Beatification ceremony on January 19, 1995.

Theoretical framework

I have chosen to use sociology of knowledge as the framework for my research. This approach was summarised by Bouma (1996:61) as follows:

> The sociology of knowledge studies socio-cultural influences on the development, distribution and impact of various ideas. It also examines the ways in which certain ideas serve the interests of various groups in a society.

From the point of view of sociology of knowledge, knowledge is created and maintained by a given social group. Knowledge is part of a group's culture. According to Dant (1991:1), knowledge is a key feature of societies: it both unites and divides groups. Knowledge is shared through language. In writing articles for newspapers or magazines - or preparing biographies - journalists and authors have to draw on a body of knowledge about their subject. Using political cartoons about Mary MacKillop, this study will investigate the social context in which knowledge is created and illustrate what Mannheim (1952:188) referred to as a *sociological change of function*. This is

> ....a change in the meaning of a concept which occurs when that concept is adopted by a group living in a different social environment, so that the vital significance of the concept becomes different. Each idea acquires a new meaning when it is applied to a new life situation.

Knowledge as an abstract reality is taken for granted in society. From the perspective of the Sociology of Knowledge, all knowledge is socially constructed. Knowledge as a phenomenon is contingent, both in its content and its form, on social processes (Dant, 1991:11). These social processes have two dimensions - knowledge is determined both by the object being known and the nature of the knower (Mannheim in Gill, 1987:88). The knower is affected by and reflects the values of society.

The cultural context of an individual is therefore an essential ingredient in the acquisition of knowledge. Part of this cultural context is the shared meanings available to the whole of society - what Bilton et al (1981:739) term the 'common-sense knowledge, or taken for granted assumptions, about society, other actors, the world.'

Within the churches, the religious teachings and practices provide an over-arching frame of reference which provide purpose and meaning to everyday life. Religious rituals and celebrations maintain the stability of everyday life by providing

a link to ultimate reality. Religion can provide an extraordinarily high degree of legitimacy when the religious views of individuals are not merely supported in a social context but also believed to be divinely inspired.

Throughout history, knowledge has been linked to power. This has been the case in particular with religious knowledge (Bouma, 1992:24-27). Organised religion, as well as providing ultimate values and beliefs for people, legitimated the differences between rich and poor, promoted behavioural conformity, and provided the social framework for all elements of life.

In the framework provided by sociology of knowledge, language plays a critical role. It is through language that knowledge is shared, extended and recorded. Language as recorded in the political cartoons of print media is of particular interest. Print media has influenced oral culture, changed scholarly knowledge and assisted in the development of cultural heritages.

Knowledge is reliant upon language for its presentation. As oral cultures gave way to print media, knowledge itself was changed as well as being recorded and transmitted in a more effective and long lasting way. Any discussion of written language must include consideration of both the intentions of the author and the forces acting upon the author. These include the author's objectives in producing the text as well as the actual process that occurs as the author engages in 'reflexive monitoring' of ideas (Giddens, 1987:105).

Within the churches, symbols are widely used as expressions of knowledge. These help to both create and maintain identity. Baum (Gill, 1987:136-143) notes that 'Christian symbols make known the hidden structure of reality' and suggests that the knowledge contained in the Christian message should undergo what he terms 'deprivatization' so that this knowledge can more effectively promote group as well as individual identity.

Knowledge can be contained within a group and Bouma (1992:7-26; 144-146) outlines how the retelling and analysis of this knowledge within the group can strengthen the sense of identity. This is particularly important in the transmission of knowledge about heroes or saints as the 'community has a vested interest in its saints living up to their image.' Saints can reinforce group identity by the way that they 'sustain commitment to beliefs, values or orientations; .. act as role models and .. point the ways for the rest.'

An application of sociology of knowledge to critical discourse analysis

Against the background of the perspective obtained from sociology of knowledge, the work of Fairclough (1992a, 1992b, 1995a, 1995b) provides one method to analyse examples from media.

In his work on critical discourse analysis and media discourse, Fairclough (1995a, 1995b) identifies language as being in a dialectical relationship with other

facets of society. Language is shaped by, but also shapes, society. The media is socioculturally shaped while at the same time helping to shape society and culture.

Fairclough (1995b:62) suggests that there are three dimensions of critical discourse analysis: the relationships between *text, discourse practice* and *sociocultural practice. Text* refer to the printed work, both words and graphics, as well as to the oral form. The texts are seen to reflect reality as well as constituting versions of reality, depending upon the social position and interests of those who produce them. *Discourse practice* is the process of text production and consumption while *sociocultural practice* is the social and cultural framework in which the text is located. Since it is my aim to further develop knowledge about culture rather than media per se, it is this latter dimension of sociocultural practice which I have chosen to focus upon in my study.

Fairclough identifies three levels in this sociocultural area to explain how the world is represented by the author. These levels will be considered for each political cartoon (the text) chosen for analysis.

Situational: This covers both the immediate context of the text and that of the larger social context in which the newspaper circulates. The person at the centre of the text is significant as are the others mentioned in the cartoon.

Institutional: The text is seen to reflect the underlying systems of knowledge, beliefs and power of the society in which the text is located. An attempt will be made to identify the way that the text is linked to other institutions such the Catholic Church in Australia and the Roman-Italian version of this church.

Societal impact: The cartoons chosen will be studied to identify the cultural values reflected and promoted by the text. The reader of the text is left to interpret the message. This will require a filling in of gaps according to the reader's experience and frame of reference. The same media may therefore have different messages for different people. Audiences are presumed to engage in what Fairclough (1995b:124) calls "interpretative activity" with texts.

As audiences engage with texts, Fairclough identifies two processes which occur: the construction of identities and the construction of relations. Because of the formative and influential role of the media in society, these processes can be integrally related to questions of power and domination. The media can help to legitimise existing power relations or they can lead to further developments in democratic processes such as pushing the boundaries in what is termed freedom of speech. The link between the identities constructed by both the reporter (in the case of this paper, the cartoon artist) and the audience is the main focus of this paper. The values projected by one and accepted or rejected by the other are part of the dynamic relationship of the transmission of cultural values. What these values are and who is promoting them are critical questions in my research.

Example 1

Figure 2: **The Daily Telegraph Mirror** *19 January 1995*

This cartoon was found in *The Daily Telegraph Mirror* of 19 January 1995. This was the day after Pope John Paul II had arrived in Sydney for the public ceremony of the Beatification of Mary MacKillop. The Pope had arrived late the previous night to be welcomed at a public gathering in The Domain, Sydney. No words are used in the cartoon, indicating the presumption that all readers would be able to identify the two figures because the arrival of the Pope for this special event had had extensive media coverage.

This tabloid daily newspaper was at that stage owned by the Murdoch group of News Limited after the merging in 1990 of *The Daily Mirror* with *The Daily Telegraph*. According to the masthead of the paper of the day, it had a circulation of 1.3 million readers a day. *The Telegraph Mirror* was quick to capitalise on the visit by the Pope: there were three editions of the paper on both the 19 and 20 January with a different front page and lead items describing the latest events. The company also produced a special souvenir magazine entitled *The MacKillop Papal Visit*.

In depicting the Pope shaking the hand of Mary MacKillop when he stepped

from his plane, the cartoonist is linking into the usual protocol given a visiting head of state. Formal welcomes are usually given on the tarmac. The fact that Mary MacKillop is the welcoming party could be taken as the fact that she rated, on that day at least, with the highest political dignitaries in the land.

No other person is represented as greeting the Pope: the waiting crowd in the background is an anonymous mass with symbolic placards.

The image of Mary MacKillop shows an ethereal being who seems to be floating in a disembodied state. It could be presumed that this was intended to show the "other worldliness" of saints. She is also shown with a halo, used throughout history by artists to depict saints. Her countenance is demure and the expression on her face with eyes downcast could be taken as another indication of sanctity, as interpreted by the media in this instance.

As with all texts, the message for readers will depend upon their background knowledge and experience. To someone with a Catholic background, the cartoon could imply that Mary MacKillop is a very important person in Australia, someone who, despite great difficulties, was accorded a unique honour. The fact that no words were deemed necessary would indicate that, to the artist, Mary MacKillop (and the Pope) needed no introduction to the newspaper audience. Both the saint and the Church leader were presumed to be recognised, respected and admired by all. Acceptance of religious differences could be implied and promoted by the cartoon.

For someone from a different background the message could be very different: saints are not real people but ethereal beings with pious countenances who do not have their feet on the ground. As such, they may perhaps have little relevance, other than being seen as mythical figures.

Figure 3: **The Australian *20 January 1995***

Example 2

This cartoon is from *The Australian* of 20 January 1995. *The Australian* is a daily national paper from the News Limited group. It did not put out any extra editions to mark this week but did give extensive coverage to the various engagements of the Pope whilst he was in Sydney.

On the previous day, besides the actual Beatification ceremony at Randwick Racecourse, the Pope had met with about 2,000 people, mostly religious women, in St Mary's Cathedral. This was a ticket only occasion to join with Pope John Paul II for a private time of prayer.

In his talk to the congregation the Pope focussed on the dignity and mission of women. He stressed the importance of Mary, the Mother of God being seen as a role model and insisted that equality of persons within the Catholic Church meant complementarity. Without actually saying so, the Pope seemed to be implying that this meant that women and men had different roles within the Church.

This was very topical as not long before, an edict had come from Rome that the question of the ordination of women should not even be discussed. Outside the cathedral, a group of women protested about the stance by the Catholic Church.

This cartoon seems to link into these themes: Mary MacKillop is identified with the deity and saints by being depicted in the clouds smiling down upon the earth. The only other identifiable person is a female casually dressed in slacks walking away from an assortment of protest placards. The anonymous crowd are indistinct but very numerous.

As no words are again used in this cartoon, it is open to a wide variety of interpretations. The fact that the woman is walking towards the vision of the saint could mean that she represents a modern woman - even a Sister of St Joseph? While she is aware of the signs and their messages: Choice, Ordination for Women, Equality, Abortion Choice, Church Hypocrisy, Homeless Catholics, she does not want to be part of the controversy.

The cartoon could also be taken to mean that women today can identify with Mary MacKillop and gain inspiration from her. The confident stride of the woman and the smile on her face could assist this interpretation.

This cartoon could have great meaning to women who are aspiring for a more active role in the Catholic Church. Cultural values promoted could include encouragement for an individual stance. Holiness (and ultimate rewards) can come to those who are singleminded and can walk away from dissent towards higher goals. Only a strong individual can do this with success, but the possibility is recognised.

An alternative and more conservative view could also be gained from this cartoon: sanctity and recognition are gained when a woman is seen to be toeing the party line and not getting involved in controversial issues.

Example 3

Figure 4: **The Weekend Australian** *21-22 January 1995*

The third example is also from News Limited group - *The Weekend Australian* of 21-22 January 1995. By this time the Pope had returned to Rome and the cartoon was obviously meant to show him relaxing in the Vatican, showing his photos, souvenirs and sharing travel tales. While Mary MacKillop is not represented as a character, she is referred to in the words used. It is presumed that readers would be aware of the happenings of the past week and know to whom the cartoon referred.

In this cartoon the Pope is dressed formally in his white robes and those with him are various grades of clerics as shown by their different hats. They are old men, well fed, drinking from chalices. The view through the window reinforces the idea that the event is taking place in the Vatican in the Pope's private quarters. The koala and the photograph held by the Pope confirm that Australia and Sydney in particular have just been visited, while the duty free carry bag could refer to the Pope's Polish ethnicity and his liking for vodka.

The comment made by the Pope is significant, following on from the cartoon of the previous day and described in Example 2. Many levels of interpretation are possible for this cartoon.

On the surface it could be seen as merely a humorous reference to the huge

crowds and great publicity that the Pope received during his trip to Sydney. The Pope is made out to have a sense of humour!

The words used could also refer to the controversial stance by the Catholic Church regarding the ordination of women. This issue is made the butt of a joke amongst the group of men. To those with the power, the topic had one meaning. To a group of women, however, it could be taken as an indication that the official church displayed a serious lack of sensitivity or understanding of the depth of feeling on this subject.

The fact that the images of men portrayed are corpulent senior citizens with bulbous noses is also an interesting indication of the perception of upper echelons of the Catholic Church in Rome.

This cartoon could be interpreted as a lampooning by the media of male domination in the Catholic Church as well as the unreality of Church authorities. The fact that the Pope could proclaim Mary MacKillop a saint but not ordain her a priest is held up to ridicule.

Example 4

Figure 5: **The Advertiser** *20 January 1995*

This cartoon appeared in *The Advertiser* published in Adelaide on 20 January 1995. This is the morning daily in South Australia and is another paper owned by

News Limited. Extensive coverage was given to the events in Sydney by this paper during the few days that the Pope was in Sydney.

Mary MacKillop in the cartoon is obviously the statue on the pedestal. She is in traditional religious garb and has hands joined in an expression of piety. The little dog, a feature of cartoons by Atchison, is making a play on the nursery rhyme, *Mary, Mary quite contrary* to highlight the uniqueness of Mary MacKillop as an Australian worthy of note.

The other two characters are the Pope, robed in ceremonial attire and with the special hat, the mitre and crosier of a bishop. Paul Keating is recognisable as the man walking alongside him.

The comment by the Pope in the cartoon refers to the economic difficulties reported in the paper; the banks were being criticised for their high charges. The news hoarding announcing "Trade figures worst ever" confirms this link.

The editorial of the day was in two parts reflecting both elements of these news items.

The siting of the cartoon in a formal church or cathedral setting immediately confirms the link in the mind of the artist between Mary MacKillop and an established institution. The dark pillars which predominate the right hand side of the cartoon and are also featured on the left hand side would suggest that this institution is solid and a continuation of past times when such buildings were the norm. Inclusion of a statue of Mary MacKillop as well as the Pope would indicate that the Catholic Church is the institution.

The Pope's reference to miracles links into the process by which Mary MacKillop in this case had been given the honour of Beatification by the Pope. There had been many articles in the media around this date referring to this feature of the Catholic Church's method for selecting saints and to the story of an unnamed woman whose cure from a terminal illness had been attributed to the intercession of Mary MacKillop and declared a miracle.

The comment by the dog using the word *contrary* could also be seen to have several layers of meaning. In her lifetime Mary MacKillop had a difficult relationship at times with various Church leaders, particularly bishops. It would be easy for a reader of the cartoon to imagine this word being used by them and to recall the difficulties faced in such a heroic way by Mary MacKillop resulting in sainthood being conferred. At another level the word could be taken in a present context to imply that Paul Keating should not rely too heavily on divine intervention to solve his economic problems. This viewpoint would also be reinforced by the words of the Pope.

This cartoon could promote two contrasting notions. Firstly, the power of prayer and the importance of the supernatural dimension to life. A second interpretation could be a stress on self-reliance and a rejection of the need for spiritual assistance. Mary MacKillop could be seen to be promoted by the media as someone who maintained a link to spiritual values despite great odds. At the same time, she was

not over-reliant upon God to solve her problems but was active in pursuing all possible solutions, no matter what the personal cost.

The Australian battler could be recognised in this interpretation.

Example 5

Figure 6: **The Advertiser** *13 May 1997*

As indicated earlier, this cartoon appeared in *The Advertiser* of 13 May 1997 on the day of the Federal Budget. As far as I have established to date, there had been no cartoon mentioning Mary MacKillop since those discussed above from 1995. There had been many references in various news reports and other magazine articles. Several books had been published in the intervening years and Paul Keating had, in fact, taken part in the launch of a book about current followers of Mary MacKillop.

The situation illustrated is a purely political one in which the Prime Minister, John Howard and the Treasurer, Peter Costello, prepare to present the Federal Budget. The scene is set in a costume shop as the two characters try to find clothing appropriate to the occasion.

The inclusion of the two politicians and the hoarding announcing Budget Night link this cartoon to politics and behaviour in this arena. The multitude of costumes discarded, or still awaiting usage, indicate the many faces of those who choose public office. The dog's comment could even be taken to indicate a certain confusion of roles on occasion by politicians.

By linking Mary MacKillop to the image to be used when presenting the Federal Budget, it could be implied that the economic message to be delivered could benefit by alliance with someone who has been publicly recognised as a person who always thought of doing good for others.

The emergence of Mary MacKillop in a political cartoon after such a long delay is to me an indication that something about this woman has gripped the imagination of the Australian public. The artist is presuming that the audience would recognise the reference to her in juxtaposition to Attila the Hun, a figure to be feared. In this sense Mary MacKillop could be identified as a figure acceptable to the broad range of the Australian public: someone who could make palatable an unpleasant economic event!

From a cynical perspective, the cartoon could reflect the lessening of the general opinion about Mary MacKillop as an Australian saint. It could even be taken as an example of the exploitation of saints - using Mary MacKillop to sell an unpopular budget.

Despite this possible negative view, the inclusion of Mary MacKillop in such a cartoon would seem to suggest that she has been accepted as an integral part of Australian - or at least South Australian - folk lore.

Conclusion

Within the Catholic Church in general, saints and sainthood have well defined meanings. Knowledge about the process by which an individual is declared a saint and what this means for the veneration of saints is understood within this group. Those outside the boundaries of this group may have different perceptions and understandings.

Up until very recent times, all saints known by Catholics and others in Australia were imports. The Roman-Italian hierarchy, the Celtic missionaries and early settlers, along with assorted migrants from European and other cultures brought with them versions of sainthood constructed from their own experience. In some cases religious reverence and supernatural connections may have been mixed with cultural practices which had no spiritual significance.

The decision by the Pope to visit Australia in January 1995 for the Beatification of Mary MacKillop gave a new focus to the question of sainthood in this country. Some of the knowledge about saints previously known by and relevant to one group within the Australian society, now was of interest to a much wider audience. Journalists and political cartoonists in particular were forced to review their knowledge on this matter. An examination of these samples of political cartoons featuring Mary MacKillop shows how the Australian media have constructed a view of sainthood which reflects the cultural values as they see them: respect for the battler, courage in the face of great difficulties, a healthy disregard for authority and the promotion of equality for women in the institutional church. The social reality of

sainthood in Australia is taking a different direction from that usually identified both with the European tradition and that usually promulgated within the Catholic Church. Following the view of Mannheim (1952:189) that "shifts in social reality are the underlying cause of shifts in theoretical systems", I believe that the Australian print media (political cartoonists in this instance) are assisting in promoting Mary MacKillop as a uniquely Australian saint who has relevance for the general Australian public.

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