

American Heaven?

There has been an interesting phenomenon on Saturday nights in some Australian cities over the last few years, which has received little recognition or consideration in church circles. A television programme, 7th Heaven, has been allowed to run on a commercial channel in a high-viewing timeslot.

The internal Promotion for *7th Heaven* reads as follows:

From Spelling Television and Brenda Hampton comes *7th Heaven*, a critically acclaimed family drama about a minister, his wife and their seven children. The WB's highest-rated series, *7th Heaven* has captured the hearts of television audiences with its witty, charming and heartwarming storytelling and has been praised for providing high-quality entertainment for all ages.

WB is America's 5th largest television network and according to its website "is currently the fastest-growing network this season among total viewers and in the 18-34 and 18-49 demographics. ... The WB is a pop-culture phenomenon and has launched the careers of dozens of young stars who make up the faces of new Hollywood including Chad Michael Murray, Kristin Kreuk, Tom Welling, Michael Rosenbaum, Alexis Bledel and Gregory Smith.". The WB stable includes *Smallville*, *Gilmore Girls*, *Reba*, *Angel* and *Charmed*.

7th Heaven is now in its eighth season, so it is clearly still doing very well in the overall ratings in the U.S.A., especially for its targeted audience. It has been the highest rated show in the WB Network stable for seven years.

After numerous attempts earlier in the year to obtain details from the television station broadcasting this programme (it is also shown on cable TV), I gave up trying to obtain comprehensive statistics. David Dale kindly sent me figures he was able to obtain from the OzTam ratings (also reported in his column **Tribal Mind** in 'Minority Report', *Sydney Morning Herald*: 12 June 2004). In commenting on viewers' favourite shows he says:

Ten's Saturday evening soap *7th Heaven* ("nice clean drama" - [viewer comment]) which draws 395,636 [is] a better result than it looks, since it is shown only in Sydney and Brisbane because of some funny footy in the other capitals.

David Dales also contrasts this to another WB effort, "the more acerbic *Gilmore Girls*, which has grown into a hit with 752,418 viewers in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane." *Gilmore Girls* is shown on Channel Nine at a later timeslot.

So, while *7th Heaven* is not as popular in Australia as in the U.S.A. it hangs on for the Saturday timeslot, up against *Funniest Home Videos*.

It is a 'soap' and certainly a "nice clean drama", and perhaps it is this combination that enables the show to obtain an audience. Parents concerned about what their children watch on

TV would be more likely to let them watch this programme and perhaps also watch it with them, and perhaps even hope to move into the role of the parents themselves as counsellors and confidants to their children.

7th Heaven has created stories around a host of contemporary issues for parents and their children, including teenage suicide, sibling rivalry, bullying and violence in schools, the Holocaust, hate crimes, prejudice against Muslims, drug use, vandalism, drinking and driving, teenage sexuality and teen pregnancy, social issues and homelessness.

The series has received honors from the Parents Television Council, The Media Project's Shine Awards, Entertainment Industries Council's Prism Awards, Viewers Voice, Anti-Defamation League, Film Advisory Board, Academy of Religious Broadcasting, Kids Choice Awards, Teen Choice Awards, Family Friendly Forum Awards and the TV Guide Awards.



It stars Emmy Award-nominated Stephen Collins as the minister or pastor, Eric Camden, and Catherine Hicks as the pastor's wife, Annie Camden, both of whom have acted in a variety of TV series and movies. Most of the children having been in other lower key roles in mainstream series, including Jeremy London who had been in *Party of Five*.

While a religious programme, the Christianity portrayed is generically Protestant. Much of the drama revolves around the minister's wife and children. I believe the generic nature of its religion makes it inoffensive to any particular group.

The episodes which have a story link to the minister's Jewish friend, who is the local rabbi, are interesting and illuminating. The rabbi takes over his services for some of the time that the minister (Eric) is ill and seems to be just another preacher, who has a few jokes about the blood of the lamb. The rabbi even supports Eric during his time of worry about the new young minister the Church Board has employed to help Eric while he is recovering.

Indeed, the religion of *7th Heaven* could be described as a Protestant variety of 'civil religion'. As such, it focuses strongly on the public reinforcement of certain morals and values, especially morals and values which are perceived to be foundational for society. There is simply little room for any doctrinal foundation or significant theological development, and certainly no room for anything leaning to sectarian or exclusive portrayal.

The focus is thus on values and moral life. What are the values portrayed?

* **The family.** The family all work together and work things out. There are the usual sibling rivalry, arguments and difficulties, but there are always strong support and help at times of crises and development. The family is essentially stable. In fact, the website of the Parents Television Council (PTC, a lobby group with at least one million members in the USA) refers to *7th Heaven* as "a refreshing look at a functional, traditional American family." The PTC have consistently placed *7th Heaven* in the Top Ten recommended shows. This family provides the counselling and support. The message is clear that one's family is the key to a healthy and well adjusted future adult life.

The role of the mother is especially strong. She is a helpmate and partner in the ministry, but not an independent career woman. Though her daughters may be able to have careers, one could see a subtle message that generally a woman's best place is the home. This point links to the next.

* **Parental Leadership and Involvement** - *7th Heaven* highlights a trend in some circles to emphasise the role of the parents in all matters related to the development of children. In the USA there has been a particular focus on parental involvement in moral and general education. Even if the children go to 'public' schools, the parents are portrayed as the people who should be the main influence in their moral development, not the state. Parents also have a vital role in spiritual development, which itself is linked to ethics and morality.

* **Sexuality** - while many issues of sexuality are discussed and personalised, the overall context promotes the values of chastity unless married and faithfulness in marriage. While issues like teenage pregnancy, dating, marriage are still

staples of this 'soap opera', the initial framework is very different to that of other teenage dramas.

* **Work ethic** - the need for success and focus on a career and a good job are highlighted.

* **Educational focus** - the importance of college and higher education are prominent themes, especially because this can lead to a good jobs.

Many of these foci and values are well respected in Australian society as well. While they may not be the values all families live by, they may be perceived with a certain ideal fascination. Nevertheless many serious issues are examined. There have been some stimulating and provocative episodes, including one which focussed on child sexual abuse in a family. The minister, Eric Camden, is a key figure here of good, rather than evil, as he presents a clear message of support and encouragement to the victims. His message to teenagers is that abuse can happen even in the best of families, and it should be exposed.

In a way, I see *7th Heaven* as a contemporary and more grown up version of *The Brady Bunch*. In this series, first aired in the USA in 1969, the creator, Sherwood Schwartz, attempted to present an image of an ideal US family, bound together by strong moral and ethical values. The element that was so prominently missing in this early series was religion (The series first aired in the USA in 1969.)

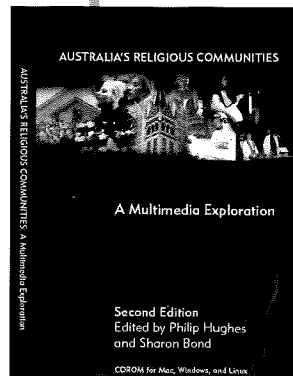
In contrast, *7th Heaven* has at least a religious veneer providing the foundation for a fundamental American ethos and a culture of family morals and personal values. Like *The Brady Bunch*, this moral

foundation would appeal to a broad section of the American public, especially those who have become increasingly unnerved by teenage dramas explicitly portraying sexuality and drug-taking. There is also a section of Australian society which would welcome the value orientation of *7th Heaven*. The growth of that orientation is evident in the growth of Christian schools and colleges, and the interest in movements such as "The Silver Ring Thing", and "Wait", and in the programme "No Apologies" (promoting chastity and staying a virgin until married), which has been adapted for use in 49 countries including Australia.

On the other hand, it seems that Channel Ten does not see *7th Heaven* as a religious programme. Apart from the timeslot, the advertising shown during the programme suggests that they see it as a general youth programme. There is a considerable diversity of advertising, reflecting Channel Ten's youth orientation, and also possibly a pitch to parents, or even grandparents who may watch the show with their children. One of the more intriguing aspects was the cross promotion of some TV shows which I thought may have been ones that many conservative parents would have on their blacklist, such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *Charmed* (though this is another WB show), and *Rove Live*.

I am still left wondering if this programme is a deliberate part of Channel Ten's youth focus, which as a youth oriented station needs to offer different programmes to different groups within today's youth. Perhaps to offer a token Christian programme is almost radical programming, and may be perceived as a subtle way of leading more conservative viewers into the other offerings the commercial station has as its main focus. After all, many conservative politicians have realised there is untapped potential in the Christian movement in Australia.

Peter Bentley



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