



## What Would Jesus Drive?

By Peter Wells

For many people in Europe, where there is a marked tendency to vacillate between lazy agnosticism and nervous atheism the question of what would Jesus drive seems rather bizarre. Yet in November 2002 a campaign was launched in the US that asked this very question. The first intuitive response for us is to turn the issue into a joke, indeed in so far as the news services here did cover the issue it was treated as the last item before the weather, the slot reserved for stories about the queen, men biting dogs, and the wrong sort of snow on the rails. The little bit of light relief after the heavy intonations of global politics and economics that gives us all a smug glow and in this case leaves us chortling in a somewhat patronising way 'only in America'.

Of course, from our damp and decrepit island we search assiduously for anything that allows us to sneer at warm, prosperous, brash America. It is only human nature, the politics of envy that really cuts across any ideology or religion.

And of course we are appalled at the frank fundamentalism of the message. The campaign (see the website at [whatwouldjesusdrive.com](http://whatwouldjesusdrive.com) for a start) goes straight to the heart of the matter,

*'The Lordship of Christ extends throughout every area of life. Nothing is excluded from his Lordship. This includes our transportation choice. This is why the question "What would Jesus drive?" is one that all Christians should ponder seriously. Obeying Jesus in our transportation choices is one of the great Christian obligations...'*

In essence the campaign has highlighted the social irresponsibility of driving large cars and so-called 'light trucks'. These vehicles are less fuel efficient than standard cars, emit more pollutants, require more resources in order to be built, use more road space, and are more damaging in accidents to other road users. Unfortunately, about half of all US passenger car sales are now accounted for by this type of vehicle – and a growing share of the sales in Europe too. So while we may consider the linkage of Christian values to the type of vehicle we purchase and use to be debateable, it is hardly a trivial issue. Even before the emergence of the notion of the 'green consumer', the person who seeks to influence environmental

issues with their purchasing decisions, there has been an ethical dimension to the buying behaviour of many people. However, the what would Jesus buy campaign has potentially profound implications.

In particular consider these two basic points. First, the US is an overtly Christian country with a high proportion of active churchgoers and people who are prepared to define themselves as Christian. Second, in the last ten or fifteen years the large US vehicle producers (GM, Ford and Chrysler) have relied upon light truck sales for profitability, having seen passenger car sales lost to Japanese brands. It is therefore of some interest (and probable concern) to the US vehicle manufacturers to see a Christian group make this stand.

Indeed, the environmental case against light trucks is strong. By way of illustration, a BMW X5 4.6is achieves a city fuel economy of 13 miles per US gallon, highway fuel economy of 17 miles per gallon, and on average will produce 12.8 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent per annum ([www.fueleconomy.gov](http://www.fueleconomy.gov)) assuming 15,000 miles travelled. This can be compared with cars such as the Honda Insight, Honda Civic and Toyota Prius that produce 3.5-4.0 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> per annum. In other words, without the distant and exotic technology of fuel cells, hybrid cars designed to achieve high fuel economy today produce nearly two thirds less CO<sub>2</sub> emissions of a typical multiple-use light truck.

Other social concerns include safety, both for the occupants of these light trucks and for the wider population. It is illustrative that National Highway Traffic Safety Administration chief Dr. Jeffrey Runge was widely quoted earlier this year offering criticism on the roll-over safety performance of some SUVs (sport utility vehicles). Meanwhile, the New York Times has been running a campaign on the social cost of light trucks because of the dangers they pose for other road users.

More generally, the question of what would Jesus drive has, lurking behind it like a monster in a childhood nightmare, the debate on religion and sustainability. Too often we try to reduce environmentalism to logic and science, devoid of spiritual values and emotion, devoid of morality even. Perhaps the British in particular tend to hide behind a comforting veil of tolerance, because if we tolerate in a multi-cultural and multi-religious society then at some level we do not have to confront basic beliefs and attitudes. Perhaps this is also why we prefer to laugh at the question of what would Jesus drive rather than seek to answer it. In the new era of political correctness religion has a rather uncertain place, just look at the contortions politicians have performed in dealing with the Iraq-Muslim-Al Qaida debate.

In the end, perhaps we need religion in order to point out the conflict between personal interest and social cost. After an entire generation of right-wing economic fundamentalism that legitimised the 'lets make lots of money' culture, that claimed against all the evidence that

'there is no society' the campaign over what would Jesus drive is ultimately a denial of the dictatorship of the individual. It is a message that all environmentalists should embrace, whatever our religious base (or even if we haven't got such a base). We are responsible for what we do, not just to ourselves but also to the people and world around us.

For this, if nothing else, the campaign should be applauded.