

# What sin did Adam Goodes commit against Australia's secular religion?

Scott Cowdell

*Charles Sturt University, Canberra, Australia*

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The Adam Goodes controversy reveals a great deal about modern society, and especially about the role of sport as a substitute religion for secular times.

For many adherents of this substitute religion, Goodes is a heretic who needs to be burned.

Modern societies are increasingly aware of this age-old mechanism, however, robbing it of the uncritical support it needs to operate effectively. Happy snaps of white Americans gathered amiably beneath the lynched bodies of black "transgressors" now belong thankfully in the past.

Such sacrifice for restoring calm in times of crisis remains, but it is harder and harder to hide its true nature. The prosecution of this mechanism against Adam Goodes by the mob and its leaders in the popular media has been exposed.

The variety of reactions to this exposure indicate some of the options we have as a society for moving forward.

## **"We are all individuals"**

The crowd in Monty Python's *Life of Brian* famously cried out, "we are all individuals." We like to think that this is true, but neither Monty Python or [Rene Girard](#) are fooled.

The mob is a factory for manufacturing identical desires, and the collective boeing of Goodes reveals what remains of our purported individualism. The mob's mutually-reinforcing desires are derived from those of key opinion makers in the popular media, who receive their desires in turn from the large cultural blocks and the powerful ideologues that they represent. Our "individualism" is derived from the desires of others. Nevertheless we hate to have our collective sameness revealed. We cling to the myth of our own originality and distinctiveness; all the better when nobody arises to highlight our collective sameness.

Adam Goodes would not have attracted attention if he had been just one more black face in the mixed palate of similarly-dressed and occupied footballers. His difference as an Indigenous man would not have stood out in a society that can cope with a lot of difference, as long as it is not too confronting. This is why people who practice traditional religions stand out so awkwardly in our society, because they represent genuine difference from the

standard values and life-projects that are conceivable under late-modern consumer capitalism.

Goodes has become so different that he began to pose a threat. By choosing to stand over against us, he homogenised us. As Australian of the Year, a role that was meant to affirm Goodes's representative status became the platform for his outspoken Indigenous advocacy. So, instead of being one of us and even the best of us, he became our critic.

Goodes's identity as an Aboriginal man, supercharged by his principled stand against racism and injustice, marked him as so different that he made the rest of us look the same. Australia as a whole came under judgement in Goodes's public protest, and we resented this unaccustomed and unwelcome experience of being lumped together.

This is why the mob began to turn on Goodes, so that by forcing him off the field it would no longer have to be under his eye - no longer constituted as a collective, with a collective problem. The reassuring myth of our individuality and distinctiveness would thus re-emerge as the natural consequence of his sacrifice.

This is how a society reboots its calming sense of differentiation, discharging the pressure of sameness from which envy and rivalry will inevitably emerge. If we are all the same then we are all potential rivals. To stem the tide of this rivalry, a sense of tolerable differentiation has to be re-established. Getting rid of the one who challenges this tolerable differentiation by their too-overt distinctiveness thus proves essential. To restore the relative safety preserved by our myth of individuality, we must dispose of any malefactor who undermines this consensus.

There is an unmistakable sign that someone is being scapegoated. Outrageous claims are made about them. They alone and in person are the cause of the problem of which their scapegoating is the solution.

In Goodes's case, he is accused of a violent action against the crowd in the war dance that he performed. He was also excoriated for his public criticism of the 13 year-old girl who called him an "ape." It is as if he abused the girl, so scandalized have pundits been about his response. The plain fact of her apology to Goodes in a subsequent burying-of-the-hatchet has not been allowed to ameliorate Goodes's blameworthiness in the eyes of his critics.

In both instances, we observe today's typical escalation of victim rhetoric. Goodes was undoubtedly the victim of crowd booing and an explicit racist taunt from that girl. Yet he was quickly recast as *victimiser*, with the crowd portrayed as victim of his mock assault - likewise, the girl as victim of Goodes's unfair criticism.

Rene Girard wryly observes that in our modern world, in which the scapegoating mechanism has been significantly exposed and disempowered, the only people we can now victimise with impunity are those we can paint as victimisers. Goodes is one such, rendered villainous in order to be deservedly scapegoated.

## "Cheap grace": Sport as substitute religion

An important further dimension of this controversy has to do with the role of sport in secular modern societies like Australia. The function of religion in pre-modern times can be read off the word itself: *re-ligio*, rebinding, reconnecting. Beneath questions of theism and atheism, and behind the typical association of religion with questions of personal meaning and purpose, lies the more originaive function of religion, which is to hold the human group together in the face of its own violent impetus to self destruction.

Envy, rivalry and violence, passing like lightning through any group that lacks our accustomed institutional protections and the safety-net of modern affluence, create a need for scapegoating so that violence is discharged and the system reset. With this miracle of peace restored came the twinned births of *culture* and *religion*.

This account, associated with the mimetic theory of Rene Girard, explains how taboos, rituals and myths emerge and are elaborated, leading eventually to stable and protective social institutions. Modern nation states, markets and the export of internal violence through the programmatic business of war-making have become secular sites of religious unity, as the function of religion passes away from churches in the modern West.

Sport is another major religious substitute. It carries violence away from society, discharging the pent-up passions of competing supporters in a largely non-violent way. International clashes reveal this even more so, as the sacred reality of the nation is diverted from warfare into the relatively pacific ritual of competitive sport. Hence the religious transcendence experienced in great sporting moments, the profound emotion, the agony and the ecstasy. Accordingly, major sporting stadiums are the cathedrals of our modern world, unrivalled in their architectural magnificence.

But in any ritual that matters, it is important not to spoil the moment. A priest can be clumsy and distracted at the altar during mass and there are no consequences, because the churches in modern Australia are no longer carriers of the *re-ligio* function. But do not mess with sport. Regular doping scandals, and the FIFA corruption saga all risk tainting the necessary purity of sporting rituals.

Seemingly half the sports news on ABC radio is about the appearance of this or that footballer before the judiciary for doing violence on the field - this is the one thing that must be stopped at all costs, and seen to be stopped. Nick Kyrgios complaining about unjust treatment from Tennis Australia and badmouthing umpires, is criticised not just for immature behaviour, but at a deeper level for reintroducing non-ritually contained conflict to the sporting arena, when the whole point is to keep it out. Likewise, soccer hooliganism replaces the ritual confrontation of sport with the actual violence it is meant to avert.

Bringing politics into sport is typically condemned, too, as when anti-Apartheid demonstrators invaded the pitch during that ill-fated Springbok tour of Australia. As [Clive Hamilton](#) recently pointed out to me, the all-white Springboks were patently political in their exclusion of black South Africans. Nevertheless, the pacific ritual function of sport

required the repression of this plain political fact. So the grace of sport is costly in terms of what has to be repressed. It recalls what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace."

Adam Goodes's heresy, in subverting the secular religion of sport, was simply to bring a wider agenda to the field. Instead of setting community division aside, fulfilling his statutory role as a professional sportsman in the discharge of communal disquiet, he brought that disquiet into the open. Rather than avoiding and distracting, which lie at the heart of sport's social function, Goodes insisted on an honest and adult confrontation.

But there was nothing honest and adult about such social functions of religion in pre-modern times. It is only due to the relative stability of modern consumer societies that we can cope with such disagreements short of actual lynching.

Thanks to the revealing power of the Hebrew prophets and the Christian Gospels, however, a different type of religion is now abroad, challenging and undoing the social function of *religio* in favour of something genuinely Godly and far more exacting. Yet the maturity that Christ and the Hebrew prophets mediate is not a high priority for most of us. We remain easily led, and significantly dependent on sport and similar such mechanisms for maintaining the *status quo*.

Such religious substitutes have become the true opium of the people. It was the call for maturity and responsibility from Adam Goodes that made him a secular heretic, and brought this hell of public disdain down upon him. He has received a prophet's reward.

### **Where to from here?**

Various reactions from the Australian public have been instructive. Two are as predictable as they are unfortunate, and they both mis-recognize the problem.

On the one hand, we have seen a predictable ramping-up of anti-Goodes sentiment. Now that no-one can be victimised and scapegoated without somebody blowing the whistle, there has been an outpouring of support for Goodes.

This has, in turn, been met with stiff resistance. Confronted by any such challenge to a deeply-held opinion, many people are driven to ramp up their own rhetoric of denial. It matters more to a racist, a homophobe, a climate change denier or any other champion of today's widespread invincible stubbornness to win the argument at any cost. Hence a place will remain for scapegoating, however contested this venerable expedient remains.

On the other hand, it is not sufficient for those claiming the mantle of enlightened progressives simply to deplore and condemn the booing crowd - like those who have screamed and ranted in the street against Reclaim Australia, for instance. Are groupthink and a lack of compassion entirely absent among the metro-left, the so-called elites? The affronted champions of inclusion and social justice can easily be trapped in the mimetic field of their despised opponents, sharing every ounce of their bigotry in a posture of self-righteous opposition.

Social progressives, too, can evade the mature call to shared responsibility and accountability that Goodes has made. Instead of following Goodes's lead in fostering reconciliation, the affronted *bien pensants* risk becoming mirror doubles of those they deplore. This is what is wrong with the culture wars more generally. The two sides descend into indistinguishability.

Far better to follow Goodes's example in returning to the field, thus being prepared to bear personal hostility as the price of social change. Perhaps he will win over his critics by proving a better model for them than the scions of popular media who have denounced him. Those who stand in solidarity with Goodes by wearing his number 37 also enact a useful strategy. Such action can attract followers away from the deceptive plausibility of the shock jocks.

The only genuinely transformative way forward is to cultivate persevering civility in engaging racism, touching the deep fear of undifferentiation and disempowerment that it represents. This is a properly religious undertaking, requiring spiritual wisdom and resources far beyond the substitute religious rituals that are all we have left in secular society. Here the formational habits of genuine religious communities can once again prove their social utility, beyond the *ersatz* alternatives.

**Scott Cowdell is a Research Professor in Public and Contextual Theology at Charles Sturt University in Canberra, Australia and a scholar at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture . An Anglican priest, he is also Canon Theologian of the Canberra-Goulburn Diocese. He is the author of seven books, most recently *René Girard and Secular Modernity: Christ, Culture, and Crisis* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2013). This article first appeared on the [ABC Religion and Ethics website](#).**