

# Sport and the Sacred Victim

## René Girard and the Death of Phillip Hughes\*

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The fatal on-field head injury and subsequent death in Sydney of 25 year-old professional cricketer Phillip Hughes has led to an exceptional outpouring of shock and grief throughout Australia, the cricketing world, and beyond. It was not just one more death. Not even the particular poignancy of a promising young life cut brutally short can account for the reaction.

There were heartfelt tributes from players, prime ministers, and presidents. Parliament observed a minute's silence. The Queen sent a private message to Hughes' parents. Schoolboy cricketers formed guards of honour and wore black armbands. One batsman paused as his run tally reached 63 to kiss his own black armband (63 was as far as Hughes got before his tragic mistiming of the impressive but dangerous pull shot left his head and neck fatally exposed to a fast-rising delivery). Bats topped by cricket caps have multiplied on sports fields and outside public buildings. The funeral in Hughes' home town of Macksville, New South Wales, attracted thousands of mourners from far and wide, and went out live on the national broadcaster. Hughes was universally lauded as an icon of sportsmanship, promise, and courage.

An important factor in understanding this reaction is the role of cricket in Hughes' death, leading us to reflect on the social significance of cricket as a ritual. Such deaths in other sporting codes, while distressing and properly lamented, are unlikely to cause shock and awe on this scale—though I would have expected a similar reaction had such a death

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occurred in American baseball, as I will explain. Boxers, racing car drivers, jockeys and even footballers suffer fatalities, but a reaction sufficient to subdue and even unite the nation will not issue from those sports.

In terms of deep-seated impact, the closest parallels for Australians in recent decades are the deaths of President Kennedy and Princess Diana, along with the 2002 Bali terrorist bombing that took 88 mostly young Australian lives. Something fundamental was touched on those occasions, as with the fatal on-field injury of Phillip Hughes. I suggest that the most basic reason for such reactions must be sought in the little-understood role that public rituals play in the reinforcement of a stable social order, with a particular place for sport in general and for cricket in particular. Those other deaths that struck our nation with such sobering force share in the same social mechanism.

The answer to why Phillip Hughes' death unleashed so much shock and awe is because the foundations of our social order were uncovered to reveal a slain victim. We are not normally meant to see this mechanism laid bare, because it works best when we know about the slain victim intuitively rather than explicitly. When we see an actual death in this context, however, it is uniquely astounding, sobering, and unifying. We can but imagine the immeasurably multiplied shock and awe had Hughes been struck dead on the spot, rather than succumbing out of public view in hospital two days later.

I ground my speculations on these matters in the mimetic theory of René Girard, who David Dawson in his excellent lexicography of the term "scapegoat" describes as having "a taste for the sanguinary and a rather cheerless view of human origins." According to Girard, who is a sworn enemy of romantic delusions and self-serving sentimentality, we are chronically unoriginal creatures of borrowed desires gravitating naturally to envy and rivalry, hence to violence, and who would not have survived as a species without having stumbled upon a way past the inevitability of such self-destructiveness.

Nowadays we modern Westerners have our police, courts and armies to maintain order and keep vendettas from getting out of hand. In addition we have our consumer markets to

direct, deflect, and satisfy desire, so that rivalry is kept in check. We also have our official collective enmities to maintain group cohesion. Think of the role played by a noxious anti-Semitism in countering the social chaos of Weimar Germany on its path to unity under the Nazis, or of lynch law in America's volatile post-Civil War South. But where we have institutions, and institutional antipathies, to keep us together, our hominid forebears had yet to evolve these structures. Again and again proto-humans must have chanced upon a reliable mechanism that stilled the escalation of violence upon which there was no institutional brake: the mob suddenly turning on an innocent scapegoat in whose collective condemnation, stoning, dismembering, lynching or drowning the social crisis found miraculous resolution.

Our order-maintaining modern institutions evolved out of the three structures whereby earliest humans preserved the pacifying effect of this founding murder. *Prohibitions*, or taboos, prevented rivalrous behaviour from re-asserting itself. *Myths* encoded and thereby helped preserve the calming effect of this primal murder in a covert way, as plagues, floods, and other metaphorical stand-ins for mobs descending into self-destructive violence were all resolved once a malefactor disappeared into a lake to become the tribe's totem fish, or into the sky to become the moon God, or some such. (I grossly oversimplify here, but Girard mounts a formidable typology of myths from classical antiquity and tribal cultures worldwide, exhuming the actual corpses on which the mythical edifice is established. Where George Eliot's scholar parson Edward Casaubon was defeated in his search for "the key to all mythologies," I am persuaded that René Girard has succeeded.) A third technology for deflecting and defusing violence is provided by *ritual*, which is the key thing for present purposes.

Rituals unite a society in recollection of its founding murder, though as in myths there has to be a veiling of the whole truth lest its revelation weaken or undermine the cure. Without suitable awe and mystery surrounding them, so that the pragmatic nature of their efficacy remains concealed, such rituals lose their power. This is why the rituals of organised religion have so little power to move us any more, while rituals of militarism, celebrity and sport can still get the blood pumping.

Initially human victims were killed, and later animal substitutes were sacrificed. Rituals of kingship often involved ceremonial challenges to the intended ruler by armed groups, which for Girard points to the origins of kingship in the way that prisoners were often kept in favoured conditions until the moment of their sacrifice, when their scapegoat role was revealed. The echo of this particular ritual substitution is alive and well, with recent history confirming the close connection remaining between celebrity, leadership, and the proneness of such widely envied persons to be made victims. Hence a whiff of the ancient sacred, in all its terror and wonder, is preserved. The sense of emotion that a military parade, or a jet fighter flypast, or even an academic or judicial street procession can evoke points to the social cohesiveness fostered by such ritual functions. They are religious in a primal way that works—and still works—far below the more superficial level of contested beliefs over which today's theists and atheists argue.

So what about those other powerful social reactions to particular deaths in recent times? Quasi-sacred charismatic leaders like President Kennedy and Princess Diana evoked this mechanism in the means of their dying. Think of JFK killed in the midst of a crowd, and now lying at the heart of Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, D.C. There the crowds still come to “suck reviving blood,” as Shakespeare said of the ritually sacrificed Julius Caesar. And think of Princess Diana. She was slain in near mythical fashion as if by a pack of dogs, and is now enshrined on her fairy-tale island in a lake on the family estate, while also elevated to the cloud of immortality in millions of glowing internet images. These deaths recall the ritual pseudo-deaths of the King in those African and other rituals that Girard explores. Except in the cases of Kennedy and Diana there were actual deaths, so that the public got more than it bargained for. The roots of the system were laid bare, and the result was shock, awe, and the posthumous near-deification of these victims, in continuity with the very earliest days of human cultural evolution.

I suggest that the Bali bombing took place in the midst of another ritual, whereby succeeding generations of Australians come of age by visiting Bali. That island of licensed misrule represents a liminal ritual space for young Australians to explore the risks and joys

of transitioning to adulthood. But on this occasion the familiar ritual of departure, risk and return delivered more than was bargained for, in the atrocity that brought the foundations of such rites of passage to terrifying expression. So, once again, there was a level of shock and awe that would not have attended the deaths of that many young Australians in a bus or plane crash, a ferry capsize, or in any of the other dreadful happenstances that fall upon us in the less mythically freighted avenues of life. It was not just the deaths, then, or even the violence. Rather, what made Bali so shocking and sobering was the way that a ritual for managing the risk of social disruption that youth on the cusp on adulthood represents came suddenly to reveal its sacrificial antecedents.

In the case of sport, we are dealing with public rituals par excellence. Some of our greatest buildings are devoted to sport, with the huge expenditures once allocated to the sacred in its Christian form now lavished on the sacred in its sporting form. Yet all sports are not ritually identical. Some like wrestling, boxing and various forms of racing, simply recall the primal contest and its violence, though they keep it ordered and contained in a ring or on a track. These sports do not also ritually recall the mechanism by which such violence was diffused and contained.

Ball games do that for us, though there is a difference with games that focus group cohesion and aggression on the ball itself. Tennis and volleyball, along with football, hockey and polo in their various forms direct group aggression and competition onto the ball as substitute for the actual victim. In the Mongol game of Buzkashi, played on horseback with a headless goat to this day, though once with the actual head of a victim, we see the ritual origin of ball games in a far darker and more fundamental form. Yet even in this violent precursor of more recent ball games no actual player is cast in the role of victim. That is why, in a Girardian reading, one can speculate that deaths in racing, in one-on-one competitive sports, and even in ball games, are more in the order of collateral damage than of symbolic centrality to the ritual. No-one killed in these circumstances plays the role of a surrogate victim whose death is deferred by the ritual while nevertheless recalling the original victim's sacred role. Cricket, I suggest, is different.

In cricket, ritual elements for the containment and dissembling of violence are very clear. This is a gentleman's game in which the older custom of wearing long whites (now also coloured variants) has long survived its abandonment by tennis players. The slow pace of the game in its traditional form ritually represents a brake on violent escalation. Yet the batsman is clearly cast in the role of victim, with a licensed assailant flinging a hard ball of cork, string and leather weighing just under six ounces at the batsman. If the batsman appears weak, the opposing team gathers around him in what is called an "attacking field," all of which recalls the mob and the widespread practice of human sacrifice by stoning. To be sure, all such rituals hide their true nature. In cricket, the victim is not helpless but is provided with protective gear and a bat to deflect the attack, with his success against the assailant celebrated. Moreover there is the deflection of attention to the stumps, which are attacked by the bowler and defended by the batsman, representing a further dissembling of the true victim's identity. Likewise there are two batsmen, so the single victim mechanism is further concealed. Yet when one batsman is dismissed another victim comes out, typical of ritual's repetitiveness.

The only other sport I can think of with a similar structure is American baseball, hence my sense that if a pitcher killed a hitter in America there would be a similarly deep reaction. Indeed, a further Girardian element presents itself in baseball. The pitcher stands on a mound, and sacred mounds for Girard recall the cairn of stones that builds up over the body of a victim stoned to death. Pyramids as tombs and Ziggurats at the heart of cities point to the sacrificial roots of this mound symbolism. The baseball pitcher on his sacred mound has a ritual presence much like that displayed in the ritual rush upon the victim of a fast bowler in cricket.

It can be argued that the batsman in cricket is not the acknowledged target. This is certainly true, and the value of cricket as a public ritual depends on that conviction being maintained. However, since the infamous 'Bodyline' series of the 1930s, and especially with the fast, short-pitched, rapidly-rising "bouncer" becoming mainstream in the 1970s and 1980s, resulting in cricket's now-normative use of full-face helmets, it is hard not to see the batsman as targeted and threatened. His proper stoic demeanour at the crease completes

the batsman's ritual role, as he takes hits to the body with as much grace and indifference as possible, in what comedian Roy Slaven calls "wearing the ball." Yet with all this ritual concealment of the true nature of things at the crease, control breaches can occur to reveal the roots of this ritual. A cricket umpire killed by a stray ball in Israel days after Hughes' death was collateral damage to the main action, which is why I would suggest that his death did not cause the same consternation. Yet Hughes at the crease was the ritual victim under erasure, so that his death laid bare the mechanism of our social peace and order for all to see. It was shocking, and distressing, yet also powerfully unifying. The subsequent outpouring of awe and devotion can only be called religious. Here we see the sacred revealed in one of the forms whereby it survives in secular modern societies.

For René Girard, all such ritual mechanisms begin to falter with the onset of modernity. We lose our taste for witch hunts, blood sports, racism, pogroms, social exclusion, and all other ritual marks of a nervous society preserving its order at the expense of innocent victims. Instead we can distract ourselves with consumption, keep a lid on things via the quasi-religious expedient of nation-statism, and of course we retain public rituals such as sport and celebrity-baiting for helping maintain a tolerable level of social cohesion. Ever since the world united to condemn Jesus Christ, capping-off the Bible's exposure of all this, societies have become less and less able to hide behind victimization. Thus the Judaeo-Christian revelation leads directly to the death of the archaic, socially-preserving sacred, setting us inexorably on the path to secular modernity.

Versions of the old sacred are busy trying to reassert themselves wherever the Nietzschean, Dionysian spirit is given play, from Nazi Germany to the sacred mythology celebrated by murderous video games and today's mythically-themed 3D blockbusters. The Church has done plenty to deny its own best instincts, too, not least by painting a violent and judgemental God as saviour, who in reality comes more from the annals of myth than from the Gospel. Yet something of the emotional, cohesive power of these rituals abides, and all the better preserved by its roots remaining hidden from view. The death of Phillip Hughes has had such a powerful impact because it reveals the disquieting, sobering, yet powerful and unifying technology that is the primitive sacred—an entirely this-worldly construct that

our proto-human forebears happened upon to save them from their violent-tending rivalries. Hence Phillip Hughes has become at least a little godlike, has he not?

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