

## COMPETITIVE SCAPEGOATING: THE CASE OF TWO NATIONS AND TWO CONDEMNED MEN

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What is going on with the case of Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran?

What can explain the consuming media attention it has generated in this country, the universal public sympathy and, most remarkably, the complete parliamentary solidarity? How has the fate of two convicted, albeit obviously rehabilitated drug smugglers gripped the imagination of a nation?

And how are we to read the macabre hijinks to our north - with those genial smiling officials, balaclava-wearing paramilitary, happy snaps with the condemned, and set-piece posturing during the prisoner transfer?

All this represents an interesting challenge for the theorist of culture and violence. However, the mimetic theory of Rene Girard proves equal to the task.

### **Capital punishment as "sacred" duty**

From the Indonesian end, what we are witnessing is a kind of passion play of capital punishment, which typically aims at deflecting the pressing problems and collective blameworthiness of entire societies onto innocent victims.

This is not to suggest that all those on death row throughout the world are factually innocent of crimes. Chan and Sukumaran, for instance, have admitted their guilt over drug offences that would have earned them a long prison sentence here as elsewhere. Yet they are innocent of the real charge against them, and against all whom we execute: that they represent evil and disorder in their own persons, to the extent that their ritual killing is necessary to deflect their curse from afflicting the rest of society.

Here a comparison may help to clarify things. We do well to remember that our chief ally, the United States, remains heavily reliant on capital punishment.

Predominantly poor, black and Hispanic men are executed in homeopathic quantities to heal a diseased body politic. These representatives of the "social other" are obvious scapegoat victims for calming the nerves of an extraordinarily violent, gun-obsessed society, where the alternative is for Americans to acknowledge and face together the spiritual void that they have created.

Despite unparalleled prosperity, conditions of murderous violence, chronic addiction and sanctioned social predation are mainstream in America. The rich who prey on the poor are rewarded and their lifestyles are widely envied, at the necessary cost of some bloodletting at the other end of the social scale to keep society's attention deflected - the executioner's hand is quicker than the public's eye.

**One Girardian commentator** on the American justice system discusses how capital punishment is a sacrificial ritual for re-establishing social bonds - which, of course, recalls the literal meaning of *re-ligio*. Hence he cheekily argues that capital punishment represents the official establishment of religion, thereby contravening the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. So one might go so far as to say that the war on terror involves two "death cults" not one, and that these are in rivalry - as Rene Girard reminds us, brothers fight more readily than strangers do.

A pivotal issue here is that of *drugs*. Widespread reliance on narcotics is a major quasi-religious reality in our globalized world, while opposing drugs has become a new righteous cause calling for significant institutional infrastructure. Secularization is, of course, not the end of religion; rather, it represents the migration of religious meaning from churches and the like to newer institutions and preoccupations. Drugs stand at the centre of what amounts to a new religious constellation - ironically, drugs have become the new "opium of the people" and this in two senses.

First, there is the ecstasy, escape and identity that drug provide to users, knitting together a life and even a community of sorts at one remove from the social mainstream, which is perceived as alienating. But second, there is the opportunity drugs provide to galvanise that social mainstream against a threatening other, with drug users and their suppliers the designated vectors of misrule and decay. This is a convenient fiction, deflecting attention away from the root social causes of this sorry business for which all of us must share some responsibility. It exonerates "respectable" others whose lack of personal meaning and values helps foster a culture of emptiness leading to drug dependency, likewise those whose capitalistic excesses are the legal mirror image of drug-related criminal behaviour.

The drug wars can thus be understood as new "wars of religion" - between a deregulated amalgam of insouciance, personal deviance and organised

illegality on the one hand, and self-righteous institutional rectitude on the other.

The nation state is a major contender for religious status in our modern secular world, as **William Cavanaugh** demonstrates. Accordingly, we see the Indonesian state claiming its righteous prerogative, in the face of all pleas for mercy, to hit back hard against every counterclaim representing softness and leniency. It is as if a "sacred" duty to kill Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran is laid upon the Indonesian state. By unflinchingly following the logic of what Girard calls "deviated transcendence," Indonesia aims to refresh and reinvigorate its national unity and purpose - hence "Great Rome shall suck reviving blood," as Shakespeare's wife of Julius Caesar (vainly) believed.

### **The sacred ritual unravels**

There is, however, a complication in all of this concerning unwanted intrusions from an alternative version of the sacred. Once upon a time, the Psalmist did something quite new in human history and stood up for his innocence against his accusers. He declared that his socially-necessary designation as scapegoat was wrong and ungodly. The God of Israel came out on the side of victims, and Christians carry that story to a new pitch as they look to the passion of Jesus.

Here the sacred victim mechanism was definitively exposed, according to Rene Girard, while the resurrection unleashed an entirely new social imaginary. Instead of a brief but heady unity around the slain victim - a "peace that the world gives" in biblical terms - we have instead "the peace of God which passes all understanding," which is decidedly not of human origin. The resurrection points to a new world order beyond the fear of death and its technological deployment to focus and then to excrete social anxieties.

But there is a cost. Because this historico-cultural breakthrough has taken place, and has been mediated to the world by means of the Judaeo-Christian scriptures and their institutional carriers, the word is out concerning society's necessary manufacture of victims. The fruit of this breakthrough is seen in today's widening sense of equality and human rights. No one in a traditional honour society knows what we are talking about with our modern abandonment of social hierarchies, our insistence that everyone is entitled to decent treatment and equality before the law, our commitment to a new deal for women, our welcoming of foreigners and our largely non-judgmental stance towards non-traditional lifestyles. Yet all this comes from the Gospel - strange fruit indeed, and of particular import when it comes to capital punishment.

Since the truth of these things has started to dawn, the once-universal compact around capital punishment has frayed. The ritual is now kept largely out of sight wherever governments judge that protest and disruption will

advantage a counter narrative, hence depriving the ritual of its social effectiveness, and that is the case in most "civilized" countries. The number of executions is nowadays kept typically low, too. A minimum dosage is calculated to produce the required pacifying and unifying effect in the body politic without risking its poisoning through public outcry and social disorder.

One more sign that a whole ritual world is in trouble has been evident in the demeanour of various Indonesian officials. When a ritual is functioning well, its "sacred priesthood" comports itself in a grave, recollected and entirely serious manner. Girardian theologian **Gil Bailie** pointed out that the careful ritual for priestly service at the tent of meeting in the Old Testament can remind us of today's bomb squads in the way a potentially dangerous and frightening situation is approached. By contrast, he points out how Captain Cook came upon a ritual of human sacrifice in Tahiti, but one carried out with little ritual solemnity, and which consequently had no effect in calming community tensions during a time of war. The officiants were happy to explain it all to Cook, and it turned out that the designated victim was already dead.

Here we see a sacred universe centred on the slaying of a victim in the process of coming undone, with all the awe and mystery characteristic of the archaic sacred draining away.

The same thing is on show in the media circus surrounding what are most likely to be Chan and Sukumaran's final weeks in Indonesia, featuring a parade of grotesque smiles and breezy corridor interviews juxtaposed with theatrical displays of national strength and resolve in the sheer weight of security personnel and military hardware on display. Such tragedy overlaid by farce is a sign that this is a desperate business, as a modern nation state struggles to maintain the composure of a crucial public religious ritual at a time when the dishonesty and folly of all such undertakings are increasingly plain to see.

The stakes are surely high for Indonesia. It is a uniquely dispersed nation of islands, with diverse cultures and ethnicities, united under a remarkable but constantly challenged democracy. Rituals to reinforce the nation state and its unity are certainly necessary, and the execution of drug criminals is clearly one such.

But a Girardian political philosophy would also alert us to the perverse value of official enmities in shoring up national unity. For Indonesia, there is the uneasy relationship with its affluent, self-satisfied and regularly offensive southern neighbour. So along with fostering domestic unity through its opposition to drug crime, Indonesia's authorities stand to reap solid gains if they hold fast against Australia and demonstrate their sacred sovereignty by executing these two Australians. Given our own recent sabre-rattling over the protection of Australia's sovereign borders, we should not be surprised to see our

neighbour insisting on its own national sovereignty whenever our leaders plead for clemency.

### **Indonesia - Australia's own scapegoat?**

A kind of religious mood is palpable in our country, too. Last week's  **Candle-lit dawn vigil on Canberra's parliamentary forecourt**  saw a bipartisan display of unified purpose. National leaders from the three main political parties advanced together in a solemn ritual. Speeches took place flanked by a crowd of backbenchers more usually seen laughing and jeering behind their party leaders during facings-off across the chamber. Phillip Ruddock, the first architect of Australia's now bipartisan harsh policies towards sea-borne asylum seekers, took centre stage in calling for mercy.

It is certainly the case that many Australians, including genuine Christians among our national leaders, are motivated by the compassion of Christ. But this should not distract us from the alternative sacred performance that is going on in Australia, to match the competing one in Indonesia. It is no surprise that, once again, Australia is being called to unity in anxiety and even hostility towards the Indonesian government. If two Australians are being cast in the role of scapegoat by the Indonesian state, I suggest that *Indonesia itself* is the scapegoat against which Australians are being called to unity.

Why would we behave like this as a nation, and seek the ritual reinforcement of national enmities at a time like this? All sorts of reasons might be adduced. You do not need to be a foreign policy expert to recall the unhealed wounds of the murky "Balibo Five" incident and the 2002 Bali bombing, where Indonesians killed our own people. There was also Australia's key military role in East Timor in the aftermath of Indonesian aggression.

But these are symptoms. The underlying malaise is national self-definition against the other and the alien. And a lot of odd, alien behaviour has certainly been on display in Indonesia over this whole matter, providing us with convenient grist for the mill.

There is, of course, much for Australia to gain by behaving this way. If we can blame asylum seekers and foreign investors for taking our jobs and reducing our access to reasonably priced residential property, for instance, then we can avoid taking the blame for capitalist excess, a contemptuous managerial culture obsessed with downsizing and a widespread lackadaisical attitude to necessary economic reform. If we can point to the obvious failings of a justice system to our north, then we can avoid scrutiny over our own justice system. If we can gather in ritual lament over Chan and Sukumaran, who would be unlikely figures of unified national sympathy in any other circumstance, then we can safely ignore equally glaring abuses in our own backyard.

Consider our indefensible record regarding indigenous health, poverty and, especially in this context, our utterly unacceptable rates of indigenous incarceration. There is the near-carnage that we tolerate among women and children at the hands of chronically immature and rage-filled Australian men, whom our society seems to produce with reliable frequency. If we are looking to our north as the focus for our dismay over officially-sanctioned killing, then we can safely ignore the widespread killing that we tolerate in our own society, as the bitter legacy of social and relationship breakdown plays out in our appalling statistics for domestic abuse and murder.

It is a melancholy thought that Chan and Sukumaran, while serving Indonesia as scapegoats for national pride and stability, might also be serving as valuable extras in our own scapegoating of Indonesia.

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I would gladly be proven wrong, but I fear that the ritual logic of these events to our north leads inexorably to one outcome and one outcome only. The fact that these young men have been entirely rehabilitated, becoming role models for their fellow Bali prisoners and examples for us all, redoubles the tragedy.

However, the points I am making do not depend on the condemned men's blameworthiness or otherwise. Even the invincibly black hearted do not deserve to be ritually killed for the sake of calming public anxieties and reinforcing community solidarity. The logic of this expedient was plain to see when lynch law served to still social turbulence in a volatile, post-Civil War American South. Black men are still being lynched in the United States, albeit under cover of due legal process. Two good men are set to die in Indonesia according to the same distorted vision of where peace and unity ultimately reside.

But there is an alternative. It is highly likely that, should President Joko Widodo or his judicial system somehow manage to come up with a pardon and deportation for these men, there would be a new era of peaceful cooperation between our countries with significant scope for enhanced prosperity all round. Australians would no longer be able to point the finger and would instead have to open their hearts to our nearest neighbour as never before. We can imagine a new wave of rivalry growing up over which of our countries could offer the most magnanimity and goodwill towards the other - and this, of course, would be a triumph of international relations Girard-style.

Were this unlikely outcome to transpire it would be the indirect work of Jesus Christ, whose Spirit is now alive not only in the Church but within social mechanisms everywhere, wherever knots of violent unanimity come undone and a different order of human solidarity makes its surprising appearance

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