

# Heroes and Religion

Discussion paper for LightFM, February 2007

From an anthropological point of view, societies need to find mechanisms for creating community cohesion. Most commonly, indeed some anthropologists now say *always*, these mechanisms have their roots in the founding violence that brought the society into being. That's another story.

In so-called *primitive* societies, these mechanisms become rituals and form part of primitive religion. Probably, given the God-shaped hole in the heart of everyman, these religious practices are mixed up with some awareness of, or indeed some revelation of, God. But not everything in religion is Godly. Much of it has more to do with maintaining community cohesion. In other words, its purpose is to create and reinforce the values and beliefs that communities share and that serve the purpose of binding the community together. In other words, there is secular religion and sacred religion. The difference between the two is sometimes hard to discern. One reason is that it is no-one's self-interest to examine the role of these apparently healthy and useful mechanisms. Too much awareness makes the mechanisms less effective.

In western societies, the accepted myth is that we are less religious than societies in which the Church was more prominent as an institution. This is not true. As formal religion has declined in popularity, secular religion has thrived.

One modern Aussie example is the Anzac myth. The Anzac legend (based in violence, by the way) has all the character of religion. The words *sacrifice* and *sacred* are commonly used. Anzac Cove is a "sacred place." In God's order, though, hardly more sacred than any other beach he made. Regardless of any other merits, the anthropological purpose in the Anzac myth is the attempt to create cohesion and unity in Australian society.

So we come to Heroes. The role of heroes in the anthropology of community cohesion is the way they focus a community's interest, and provide acceptable forms of human sacrifice (intrinsic to effective cohesion mechanisms). Society creates heroes so we ALL believe in them. And then we kill them off through the tall-poppy syndrome, or in a car crash in Paris (not implying that was intentional, but it has the same anthropological effect).

The question for Christians is whether such secular mechanisms are consistent with the message of Jesus. His death, as society's scapegoat on the cross, revealed how this mechanism works. The question is whether we shall recognise the sin of hero worship and hero sacrifice, and having recognised it, whether we shall continue to live in sin, or try to live in the Kingdom.

The question for Light-FM is to what extent we permit ourselves to engage in the mechanisms the world throws up in order to create cohesive societies, while at the same time attempting to bear witness to a Kingdom in which love for one another is a mechanism for replacing scapegoating and sacrifice.