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## Sacred Violence in the Chamberlain Case

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### THE SCAPEGOAT

In the early 1980s, many Australians demanded their say about "Lindy Chamberlain." On radio, in letters to the media, over coffee and on television, we exposed our wisdoms about mothering, matricide, inappropriate family holiday destinations, religious sects, the dressing of children in black, the desert, the law, and the requirements of justice. Australians—not for the first time—eagerly devoured tales of uncanny happenings in the desert. In the heart of the county, at Ayers Rock as it was still called, a sacrifice of some kind had occurred. "Why would you take a child out there?" "As if a dingo could do that!"

At the center of the maelstrom was the small, determined figure of a woman. The factors that signaled out Lindy Chamberlain from the very beginning were her gender and her religion. Her gender, or the way she was perceived to perform it, was seen increasingly as truculent, not sufficiently grief-stricken, not meek or repentant in the face of growing media and legal accusations against her. Further, the Chamberlains' membership of what mainstream Australia saw as a "strange," imported religious group, The Seventh Day Adventists, soon became a source of intrigue and some derision to the general public. Not seen as a cult, quite, this barely understood American religious group and the Chamberlains' membership of it was deemed different and suspicious.

Within this context of increasingly flamboyant media constructions—a gothic, violent outback setting that even today lives within myths of frontier lawlessness, paganism, and racial atrocities—the figure of Lindy Chamberlain rose up as scapegoat. Woman as good or evil Mother, as strong or hardened, as one of "us" or a stranger in our midst — no image of Lindy Chamberlain was produced which could not be twisted into the shape of its opposite. In the gathering clouds of "hearsay" and "judgment," Australian society was, perhaps half-knowingly, enacting a sacred and ancient ritual, offering up one for the whole.

\* \* \*

In 2004, Di Drew, director of the two-part miniseries *Through My Eyes*, based on the Chamberlain case, reported that when she spoke about Lindy Chamberlain to groups of friends, or

to the extras on set, asking whether they thought Lindy (as many called her) guilty or innocent, "the response was usually the same: the group divides 65/35 per cent, with the majority verdict being guilty." For Drew this was amazing, and she reflects on the ways in which myth accrues around history and everyday normality: "It was all about that landscape and that place. It was about spirituality and it's been about religion, and a baby's name, and behaviour that's not typical" (Enker 4).

However, for John Bryson, author of the book-length study *Evil Angels*, also later made into a film, such behaviors were not atypical; nor were the many so-called scientific biases and mistakes made across the years since that night, 17 August 1980. They are for him the product of culture. In a sharply positioned piece in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1995, after the belated inquest into the whereabouts of the body of Azaria Chamberlain, Bryson wrote:

Once the laboratory mistakes are all swept away, the witnesses left standing have human faces . . . this third finding is a product of its culture, as are judgments of any kind. In that culture, we watch a fascinating mechanism at work: it's something like an inability to retrace one's steps, whatever the cost, or however wrong the path was (Bryson 21).

This essay explores the nature of this "fascinating mechanism," asking how culturally typical was the behavior of those intimately involved in the Chamberlain case, and of those more far-flung but still somehow drawn into the drama. The case reminds us of the potency of myth, and of ritual, the uses to which they are put in supposedly secular, political contexts. Myths—and stereotypes—about women in many cultures—damned whores and god's police, Mary the mother of God and Mary Magdalene, in myth a prostitute; women as dirty, and women as pure, or at least sent to clean. Further, the essay will argue that responses to the Chamberlain case, and particularly to the figure of Lindy Chamberlain, need to be read within a context of sacredness, ritual, and scapegoating, concepts with disturbing connotations for many in the supposedly deeply secular nation of Australia. The Lindy Chamberlain case opens up the intimate link that exists between the sacred and violence—as the world crashes down, woman will descend

and sweep up the shards; or, differently, it has all gone wrong, it must be *her* fault. Not only is the Chamberlain case readable within such a context, but much of the import of what happened to this woman and her family needs to be examined in relation to the category of the sacred, as a way of thinking further through the often rancorous divide between sacred and secular in Australian culture.

#### SACRED AND PROFANE

While secularity has its own history, and cannot be reduced to “the profane,” it’s important firstly to examine the division between the realms of the sacred and the profane that structure early twentieth-century anthropological thinking. In Émile Durkheim’s *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), Rudolf Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy* (1933), and Mircea Eliade’s *The Sacred and the Profane* (1957), the realm of the sacred was articulated as separate from the profane world of everyday, domestic, and ordinary existence, though impinging upon it as an archaic force. In Durkheim’s work this power was life giving and necessary to individuals and society but could also be ambiguous and even dangerous. Otto built on Durkheim’s notion of the anti-rational power of the sacred, locating it “beyond” the profane and employing certain elements of the sublime, including dread and awe in response to the sacred. For Durkheim, the sacred operated in society through the setting aside of specific times, places, actions (rituals of sacrifice and blood-letting, cleansing, purifying, etc.) and objects (totems, emblems), which maintained for the clan a separation of sacred and profane.

For Mary Douglas, too, writing several decades later, ritual was at the core of understanding the relations between sacred and profane. In Douglas’s canonical work *Purity and Danger* (1966), based on her field work in the Belgian Congo (1949–1951 and 1953), she is concerned with understanding the rules a culture establishes in order to decide what is clean and what unclean, what is to be considered holy and what untouchable. In relation to the foundations of ongoing Jewish cultural rules regarding what can and cannot be eaten, and what is constituted as clean, Douglas wrote: “A rule of avoiding anomalous things affirms and strengthens the definitions to which they do not conform” (41). Douglas’ work continued this concern with borders and definitions, asking how and why it is that peoples need to classify, and to ritualize those classifications. Developing her understandings of taboos and cleanliness in overtly religious societies, she extended these cultures’ need for classification and ritual, applying her findings to all societies, writing:

As a social animal, man is a ritual animal. If ritual is suppressed in one form, it crops up in others, more strongly the more intense the social interaction . . . Social rituals create a reality which would be nothing without them. It is not too much to say that ritual is more to society than words are to thought. (63)

Hence, Douglas’s work elaborated upon the sacred aspects of

ritual, taboo, anomaly, and conformity to the group, across both religious and so-called secular societies, understanding that cultures need to establish what is acceptable and necessary for order, as against what must be eradicated as anomalous. Ritual, and the raw, instinctual nature of the processes that impel such rituals of recrimination and bloodletting, were certainly evident in the Chamberlain case.

Like Douglas, philosopher René Girard has been influential in questioning this earlier dichotomy of sacred and profane. His seminal texts *Violence and the Sacred* and *The Scapegoat* contribute in specific ways to understanding the Chamberlain case. What are most pertinent are Girard’s insights into the relationships between sacredness, violence, and sacrifice, read, with Douglas, as pertaining not just to other, past or so-called primitive societies, but in the urban, western cultures of today.

For Girard, social violence must be understood as a central, sacred, and structuring element of social life. Girard argues:

the operations of violence and the sacred are ultimately the same process. Although ethnologists are generally disposed to acknowledge that violence exists at the heart of the sacred, they also hasten to add that the sacred includes another, more important and directly contradictory element . . . it involves order as well as disorder, peace as well as war, creation as well as destruction . . . the theory of generative violence permits us to define the sacred in simple, concrete terms . . . Nonviolence appears as the gratuitous gift of violence . . . men are only capable of reconciling their differences at the expense of a third party . . . the surrogate victim. (*Violence* 273)

In conjoining the violent and sacred practices of many cultures through history, Girard also (controversially) introduces the pan-historical role of the scapegoat and of communal sacrifice. He asks how communities, when they are undergoing particular forms of violence—whether from nature, or between warring groups, or because of an individual’s actions—found stability and equilibrium again. Girard describes what he calls “generative unanimity,” understood as “a process for changing bad violence into stability and fecundity . . . in the attenuated form of ritual sacrifice.” (280–81). It is in this reading of the workings of the sacred that the role of a surrogate victim arises.

Of course, Girard’s interpretive agendas need to be acknowledged from the outset. He makes his claims regarding the role of the scapegoat and of ritual within a larger—and in many aspects quite radical—Christian context, which acknowledges the centrality of Christ who “offered us a new historical possibility for breaking the underlying structure of violence” (Petersen 642). As his critics have argued, it is sometimes unclear whether Girard’s claims are really historical and scientific, and how much they are metaphorical or psychological. As one critic of Girard et al’s *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (1987) writes:

when he seeks to ground his psychological insights within a literal historical framework, he becomes insensitive to

the complexities of the religious symbolization process. By insisting that there literally must be a "founding murder" as origin of sacrificial ritual, he artificially separates human symbolizing from historical phenomena." (Petersen 642)

#### ORDINARY AUSTRALIA

My argument rests strongly on the psychological and metaphoric resonances of Girard's ideas. It is irrefutable that such processes of scapegoating, with all their tragic dimensions, were set in train around the Chamberlain case. The complicating factor—of bad violence turned into stability—described by Girard in positive, Christian terms in regard to a society's need for ritual, can be seen operating, but askew, in this case. Australians—supposedly laconic, secular, not given to the genre of high tragedy, but more usually of comedy or self-parody—found themselves embroiled in a narrative that horrified and fascinated: sacrifice, a child's death, maternal guilt, an ancient desert setting which provoked wild characterizations and judgments. A grand moral and existential battle was initiated juridically and in the media on the back of an "ordinary" Australian family.<sup>1</sup>

In the name of justice, Australians from many different places and backgrounds wanted their say, and their say, it seemed, demanded a culprit, legal intervention, a scapegoat, and retribution. It was almost as if it was every Australian's right and duty to have something to say, and this something was usually of a moral, and/or judicial nature. The dingo and black sacrifice jokes came a little later. This phenomenon of nationwide opinionizing highlights the core cultural contradiction: in the name of communal justice and stability, an avalanche of violent and scapegoating media articles, television programmes, and legal processes were unleashed on the head of a woman. How far can we interpret this avalanche of attention and involvement in the case, from right around the country, as well as internationally, as an enactment of ancient, sacred ritual of scapegoating, as evidence of a deep need to keep the borders of social stability patrolled, the role of the woman and the family in place, the sanctity of motherhood fixed?

Lindy Chamberlain was fixed: as a Seventh Day Adventist, the wife of a preacher, from the highly religious community of Cooranbong, near Avondale, NSW, where there was a Seventh Day Adventist theological college and five SDA churches, one with over 1000 members, in a small area. Not much was known by the broader Australian society about Seventh Day Adventists then, but it was soon broadcast that they were vegetarians, that they didn't drink coffee, tea, or alcohol, and that they officially adhered to strict laws of justice and personal righteousness. For Adventists, Jesus was believed to have removed himself from Earth at his death, and to be doing "investigative judgment" on all who would make a claim to be admitted to heaven. Americans Ellen G. White and her husband James were discussed in public forums as prophets of the SDA movement: they had lived in Australia, in the Avondale area, and had chosen under God's directions

the site of the theological college.<sup>2</sup> Such background "facts" began to circulate about Lindy Chamberlain and her family's religious history. Secular Australia was in a frenzy.

Within this national frenzy a litany of strange "facts" and moral opinions, still able to be recited today by many Australians, began to circulate via the media and from person to person: the child had been named "Azaria," which meant "sacrifice in the desert"; Lindy had been known to dress the baby in black, with connotations of Satanism or witchery for some pundits; the deed had been committed in a strange, even haunted place, Ayers Rock (Uluru), where Aborigines were making what to non-indigenous Australians sounded like wild claims about sacred connections to the country, and the Rock. What kind of woman would take her children out to such a place—and such a young child at that? The buzz of suspicion soon grew deafening across the country, and Lindy Chamberlain was transformed, little by little, from suffering mother to perpetrator.

#### THE FEMALE MONSTER AND HER SOCIETY

In the public embrace of these religious "facts" and opinions, Chamberlain was transmogrified even further from woman to some other kind of *creature*: doing her nails in court, refusing to cry in public, affectless. The discourses that began to emerge around her raised questions about whether she was a real mother, a real woman, a normal Australian. In this context we must ask again: "What is a scapegoat?" Girard describes the nature of the ritual victim:

If the victim is to polarize the aggressive tendencies of the community and effect their transfer to himself (sic), continuity must be maintained. There must be a "metonymic" relationship between members of the community and ritual victims. There must also be discontinuity. The victim must be neither too familiar to the community nor too foreign to it . . . this ambiguity is essential to the cathartic function of the sacrifice. (286)

While critics such as Martha Reineke have criticized Girard for the lack of gender concerns in his universalizing and pan-historical anthropology (Reineke 1992), Girard's analysis of the processes of the sacred and of societal demands for sacrificial victims is still, arguably, enormously helpful and suggestive as we observe the Chamberlain case. Do we, in this case, detect "a collective transference against a collective victim that can be completely arbitrary and against whom all tensions are projected, the scapegoat." (Girard, qtd. in Müller). Some would argue that the legal and communal processes that "established" Lindy Chamberlain as guilty were not completely arbitrary, yet in hindsight they take on an awful, arbitrary logic: the woman as scapegoat. Julia Kristeva's gendered intervention on the nature of the sacred does move us one step further in thinking about the context of the Chamberlain case:

Could the sacred be, whatever its variants, a two-sided formation? One aspect founded by murder, and the social

bond made up of murder's guilt-ridden atonement, with all the projective mechanisms and obsessive rituals that accompany it; and another aspect, like a lining, more secret still and invisible, non-representable, oriented toward those uncertain spaces of unstable identity, toward the fragility—both threatening and fusional—of the archaic dyad, toward the non-separation of subject/object, on which language has no hold but one woven of fright and repulsion? (Kristeva 58)

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva introduces gender and the archaic dyad—the mother and child—into her discussion of sacredness and scapegoating. She also suggests an even more primal origin to this figure of woman—woman as the one who will always already be both source of identity and meaning, and of defilement, abjection, loss of stability. Kristeva, drawing on Freudian and Nietzschean notions of archaic violence, here distinguishes between the socio-political realities of violence and its ritual assuaging, on the one hand, and a more linguistic and psychological understanding of the primal human condition, formed through the dyad of mother and child, and before language, representability, identity. This latter state she describes as causing “fright and repulsion” in the proper, law-abiding world of discrete representations, of right and wrong, he and she, murderer and innocent. By extension, the scapegoat in Kristeva's frame must be the abject creature par excellence, passing from the proper to the improper, the clean to the monstrous, the mother to the murderer. That which both fascinates and must be expelled.

And so the question must be asked again of the very real—everyday, political, lived—Chamberlain case: Is transformation—of social violence, of the rituals of bloodletting, scapegoating, and abjecting at a social level—ever possible? Can the memory of the Chamberlain case effect a difference in the way Australians conduct their processes of mercy and justice? In the face of Kristeva's psychoanalytic universalizing, it perhaps seems a naïve question. Are societies—pre-modern and so-called modern—inevitably driven to such rituals of perpetual scapegoating?

#### PERPETUAL SCAPEGOATING?

According to Girard, and also the anthropologist and Biblical scholar Mary Douglas, so-called modern societies with their sophisticated legal procedures are in no way exempt from the sacred demand for release from guilt. Girardian critic Stephen Kaufman takes up this question:

What about “civilized” cultures? They are not free of sacred violence, but it tends to be more hidden, for at least two reasons. First, courts of law have generated order in “civilized” societies such that there appears to be no need for scapegoating to maintain social order. If someone feels slighted, they may take the issue to a supposedly impartial court, and peaceful resolution is possible in ways that are often not available to primal cultures. The need for sacred violence therefore appears

reduced. In truth, judges have become the high priests, rendering judgment and punishing wrongdoers. A Girardian analysis still points to sacred violence at the origin of differentiating “good” from “bad,” from which the law derives. (online)

This paper has been arguing that it is important to recognize Lindy Chamberlain, and to a lesser extent her family, as scapegoats of Australian culture's sacred violence. Often Girard, especially in his earlier works, speaks and writes as if such mechanisms are inevitably and simply repetitious, and that all societies are prone to this “storage of violent energy which tends towards explosion and . . . In order for this violence to be deferred there must be a collective transference against a collective victim that can be completely arbitrary and against whom all tensions are projected, the scapegoat.” (Girard, qtd. in Müller). If we accept Girard's basic premises (as historical, and/or metaphorical), we are able to consider “modern” societies, just as much as overtly religious cultures, now and in the past, as gripped and impelled by such mechanisms. It would take another essay, at least, to open up Girard's and others' arguments regarding the possibility of transformation of such mechanisms in the modern era.

At a more popular level of discourse, but similarly attempting to think about what purpose Lindy Chamberlain's scapegoating served for Australian society, the anonymous Australian author of the onemansweb blog site wrote on the topic:

Lindy Chamberlain offered us a wonderful opportunity. We could vent all our rage about children, and all our guilt, on this woman who was telling such an “unlikely” story. She was the ideal candidate for a scapegoat: female, not showing enough grief, a member of a strange religious group. We could safely tip all our hatred, prejudice and anger on her—as journalist, police, or the ever-expert general public.

While oneman has a gender-inflected argument here, it's important to note that his fuller discussion also embraces the Australian treatment of “disgraced” Governor-General Hollingsworth and what oneman calls “the howls for his resignation,” and the “baying on commercial radio talkback.” Scapegoating in the case of Lindy Chamberlain does of course have a very different orientation and set of circumstances. However, the same operations of social violence were observable in the case of former Bishop Hollingsworth, who before he was submitted to any civic legal inspection was caught up in highly emotional and explosive declarations of his guilt. As a religious figure accused of being at the very least “passive” in regard to the Anglican church's abuse of children, he was constantly described as culpable by the broader populace. In common with many societies, Australians have a history of vociferously calling for blood when the inflaming issue of the safety of children, in relation to the institutions of religion, is seen to be at stake, as they were in both the Chamberlain and the Hollingsworth cases.

It has been possible to show that the Lindy Chamberlain case affirms, or even exemplifies, the central and arguably pessimistic thesis of perpetual scapegoating. Such arguments suggest that the practice continues in contemporary Australian society. However, in the context of the subsequent actions of individuals of good will, in parts of the Australian legal system and more generally, of those who were able to interpret acts of scapegoating in the Chamberlain case and to deconstruct its mechanisms in multiple ways, can Australians, in John Bryson's words, acknowledge the cost and the wrong path taken? Can we hope that this critical reflexivity and self-knowledge might act as a counterbalance to the worst effects of scapegoating? In his later view of sacred violent repetition, Girard does offer some more hopeful arguments. His 1987 work *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* points to this capacity for societies to understand their own violent sources. For Girard, such cultural self-knowledge comes slowly, however, through revelation:

The Logos of love puts up no resistance; it always allows itself to be expelled by the Logos of violence. But its expulsion is revealed in a more and more obvious fashion, and by the same process the Logos of violence is revealed as what can only exist by expelling the true Logos and feeding upon it in one way or another. (Girard 274)

Articulated in broad theological terms, Girard's argument might be too close to Christian dogma. At the everyday level of individuals and cultures, this understanding of the struggle between "the Logos of love" and the "Logos of violence" might make little sense, might seem merely metaphoric, or mystical. Certainly the living woman, Lindy Chamberlain, did not go peacefully or without a murmur—under the sign of love—into prison. She and her supporters waged vigorous resistance legally and through the media, against the violence to which she saw herself and her family being subjected. This resistance necessarily took place in a cultural context in which violent and subterranean, as well as overt religious and sexual stereotyping, was rife, and on terms already decreed by the "modern" society of which she was a citizen: the institutions of its policing, law, mass media, scientific knowledge. Such institutions, still trailing their enlightenment beliefs, most often define themselves as operating impartially—believing themselves to be at some remove from the perceived extremes both of "the Logos of love" and the "Logos of violence."

Twenty-eight years later we can now reflect on what we have learned from "the Chamberlain case": from the life, expressed feelings, beliefs, actions, and experiences of Lindy Chamberlain the woman, her daughter Azaria, her husband Michael, and their three other children, who were turned violently by their society into scapegoats. There will be individual responses to this drama, but at the level of the culture Girard's theory rings true here. Has the nature of the drama played out between "The Logos of love" and "The Logos of violence" become clearer in the intervening years? Can the Chamberlain case stand as a memorial, an accrual of wisdom, so that the very institutions of

this culture might be changed and empowered to acknowledge the horror and farce of violence and scapegoating to which it is so ineluctably and repeatedly drawn?

The final, though belated, liberation and legal vindication of Lindy Chamberlain may make us feel something of that new possibility. However, in the larger context of Australia's actions towards its indigenous peoples, and towards the many refugees who have sought asylum in this modern nation, it seems that scapegoating—the militant protecting of the borders of the self and the community against perceived violences without and within—continues, driven so often by potent, archaic forces. The recent Apology to the members of the indigenous stolen generation, delivered on behalf of the Federal government by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, might be read in this larger context of sacred violence, as a new, more hopeful public ritual that seeks to address the repetitions of the past. □

## NOTES

1 Of course, Freud was following the ancients, he argued, when he delineated the complexes and taboos that brew within the heart of the family, and all those fatal mothers and daughters: Medea, Antigone, Clytemnestra, Electra.

2 Ellen Gould White (1827–1915), acclaimed as an SDA prophetess, visited Australia from America between 1891 and 1900. See *The Australian Dictionary of Biography* entry.

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B. N. Oakman

## In Defense of Hawaiian Shirts

Too many uniforms mean a country's turning dangerous,  
that's what I thought as I watched *Triumph of the Will*\*—  
masses of Germans marching (in step)  
kitted out in matching threads and shod with leather boots (named Jack)  
and the film's star is The Fuhrer (he of curt salutes and silly poses)  
who shouts a lot about the rules for partying with his tidy mob.

And today it frightens me nobody simply works a job,  
they are members of a team and trussed  
in corporate garb for fish shops, planes and pubs and banks  
and embroidered with their masters' names—even those  
who drive a taxi are buttoned in a company shirt  
(with insignia, epaulets and badge)  
and every one of them commands that I enjoy my bloody day.

So it's with some fondness I remember  
(and I don't believe I've made this up)  
being served one cold July (in Customs) by a silent splendid clerk  
who wore a loud Hawaiian shirt  
where the waves were blue and the sands were gold  
and lithe brown girls in grassy skirts  
with hibiscus flowers in their raven hair  
swayed beneath his printed palms and shimmered with Alohas.

\**Triumph des Willens*, 1934, dir. Leni Riefenstahl, 114m, b&w

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