

## The Melbourne Cup: Australian identity and secular pilgrimage

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Recent sociology of religion has emphasized the collapse of the sacred into the secular, and noted the shift in Western identity-formation from stable, institutional, religious sources of identity to fluid, individualist, consumerist sources of identity. One significant consequence of these changes is the sacralization of secular phenomena such as sport and shopping, and the corresponding commercialization of religious phenomena. This essay analyses the place of the Melbourne Cup, an annual horse racing event held on the first Tuesday of November, in contemporary Australian identity-formation. Further, it explores the ways in which attendance at the Cup and other modes of participation in the race, which might be viewed as 'secular' activities, have become quasi-religious or 'spiritual'. Pilgrimage best characterizes attendance at the Cup; and observance of the Cup's traditions (sweepstakes, ceasing work for the duration of the race, champagne breakfasts) are best understood as postmodern consumerist rituals for individual Australians, reinforcing personal identity.

### Introduction

As a sporting event, the annually staged Melbourne Cup horse race ('the Cup') mesmerizes the entire Australian nation on the first Tuesday in November, demanding national reverence and devotion as befitting a religious festival. The Cup, which is a long-held Australian sporting tradition, provides local Melbournians, and a plethora of interstate and international tourists, with an opportunity to pay homage to many demigods. Some of these are site-specific to this Australian event (such as particular horses and individuals connected with horseracing), whilst others are more germane to postmodern consumer society. Australia is a notably secular country, its convict origins contrasting strikingly with the Pilgrim Fathers of America, and America's subsequent notable religiosity among contemporary western nations.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, sport, gambling and drinking, notably profane activities, have been central to Australian self-understanding since white settlement in 1788. Some have boldly suggested that, if horse racing is *actually* a religion, then it is no doubt proper 'that the day should be declared a public holiday'.<sup>2</sup> In the late nineteenth century, while on a visit to the antipodes, the American writer Mark Twain wrote that the Cup 'is the mitred Metropolitan of the Horse-Racing Cult. Its raceground is the Mecca of Australasia', and further:

it is the Australasian National Day ... Cup Day is supreme – it has no rival. I can call to mind no specialized annual day, in any country, which can be named by that large name – supreme. I can call to mind no specialized annual day, in any country, whose approach fires the whole land with a conflation of conversation and preparation and anticipation and jubilation. No day save this; but this one does it.<sup>3</sup>

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This essay explores pilgrimage to the Melbourne Cup, commencing with a brief history of the Australian horse racing industry and the Cup itself, demonstrating its importance for Australian identity. This is followed by an exploration of various themes that make the Cup a pilgrimage sporting event. The final section explores the characteristics of postmodern spirituality, and demonstrates that apparently secular events such as the Melbourne Cup can take on religio-spiritual significance for modern spiritual seekers.<sup>4</sup> For this argument a working definition of *secular* pilgrimage is required. This category of travel fits between traditional religious pilgrimage and purely secular tourism: this type of pilgrimage is the undertaking of a journey that is redolent with meaning, which may be associated with an individual spiritual quest, operating outside formal religion. Victor Turner's (1973) classic *schema*, although contested, has enduring relevance here. For Turner, a pilgrim is one who separates from his/her everyday situation and enters a liminal state, where *communitas* with fellows is experienced and transformation anticipated; when reintegrated into the community s/he manifests a transformed state as a result of this process. What distinguishes secular pilgrims from religious pilgrims is that the latter undertake their journey as 'an act of faith' within an established framework, whereas the former are more focused on experiencing something magical that punctuates the normal humdrum patterns of daily life.<sup>5</sup> This experience, when the sacred manifests amid the profane, is a memorable 'special' moment, which, for the pilgrim, is more *real* and profoundly connected to identity than everyday existence.

### **The history of the Melbourne Cup and its significance for Australian identity**

Early colonial Australia relied upon horses for labour, transport and recreation from its foundation in 1788 through to Federation in 1901, and thus it is perhaps not surprising that horses have a special place in the Australian *ethos*. A rich tradition of bush balladeers, poets and writers have made the deeds of horses part of Australian popular legend, with Adam Lindsay Gordon, A.B. 'Banjo' Paterson and Nat Gould being some of the more notable writers who spoke of it.<sup>6</sup> Australian horse racing dates back to the early nineteenth century, with the establishment of a racetrack on the banks of the Hawkesbury River (on the outskirts of Sydney) in 1809,<sup>7</sup> and today horse racing remains an 'important sporting, social and economic event in many country towns'.<sup>8</sup> The initiators of racing in the colony of New South Wales were the regiments, and it functioned as a leisure activity for the emergent gentry. Governor Lachlan Macquarie permitted the first formal race-meeting 'at Hyde Park in October 1810', and in 1842 the Australian Jockey Club (AJC) was founded as a permanent institution with responsibility for organizing racing programmes and conducting meetings.<sup>9</sup> Yet it has been argued that, 'excessive enthusiasm among the colony's labouring classes' for racing was apparent,<sup>10</sup> and that men, women and children embraced racing fervently, as one of the very few opportunities available to them to escape their working lives. This attitude is expressed in a verse printed in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 29 May 1850:

Away now from Sydney – gay Homebush the place is  
I hear all around me in ecstasy say;  
'Leave care till tomorrow – Let's off to the races!'  
So off with the others I canter away.<sup>11</sup>

The 1850s gold rush in the colony of Victoria saw an increase in both the population and wealth of Melbourne. Founded in 1835, the colony's capital city grew from a sleepy town of 20,000 to a bush city of 140,000 and this rapid growth provided a demand for an increasing array of social events and entertainments.<sup>12</sup> Besides providing a social element

for Melbourne's squattocracy, horse racing also became an outlet for the miners to spend their new-found wealth on gambling at the races. Four thousand attended the first Melbourne Cup, held at the Flemington Racecourse on Thursday 7 November 1861 (the first day of a three-day programme), which was won by Archer. Originally run as a two-mile race but converted to 3,200 metres in 1972,<sup>13</sup> the Cup is a handicap race which favours mature horses who are stayers, rather than younger untried horses. In 1869, the Victorian Racing Club (VRC), which leased Flemington Racecourse at a peppercorn rental of one shilling per annum, altered the Spring Carnival programme to span four days; and in 1875 again reconfigured the event, so that the Cup was now run on a Tuesday, where it has been scheduled ever since. By the end of the late nineteenth century the Cup had become Australia's most important horse race, with the distinction of also being Australia's premier gambling event. Melbourne bank staff and public servants were given a half-day holiday for the Cup in 1865,<sup>14</sup> and the Melbourne Cup now enjoys the unique honour of being the only horse race in the world that confers the benefit of a full-day public holiday on its city's citizens.

With Federation in 1901 the disparate state colonies united to form the nation of Australia, and horse racing, drinking and gambling took on increased significance in the quest for national identity, with the Melbourne Cup taking its place in a sequence of national 'days' (Australia Day on 26 January, and the later addition of Anzac Day on 25 April being the most significant) offering opportunities to celebrate 'Australianness'. Melbourne was the capital of Australia from 1901 to 1927 during the construction of Canberra. This intensified the Cup's nationalistic associations. In the lead-up to the Cup's centenary in 1961, the Prime Minister Robert Menzies famously stopped parliament to listen to the Cup in 1950 (initiating a tradition continuing to the present), accompanied Queen Elizabeth II to Flemington during her visit to Australia in 1954, and in 1960 authorized the issue of a commemorative stamp to mark the occasion of her visit.<sup>15</sup> Arguably, Melbourne Cup Day is the most important of the 'national days' for the celebration of Australian identity: Australia Day, the commemoration of the arrival of the First Fleet of white settlers in 1788, is tainted by the protests of displaced indigenous Australians who lost their land; and Anzac Day is devoted to mourning the war dead, particularly those from the First World War. Melbourne Cup Day alone celebrates the experience of being Australian in a joyous and unshadowed fashion.

Phillips and Smith's interview-based research indicates that going to the Melbourne Cup (along with barbecues, football and Anzac Day) were amongst a range of activities and events which represented core 'Australian' cultural symbols linked to national identity.<sup>16</sup> It is not only in the arena of sport that ritual and spectacle play an important role in society, but also in civil religion. First coined by the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rosseau (1712–78), the American sociologist Robert Bellah has demonstrated the relevance of this concept in the post-war west.<sup>17</sup> Civil religion is a 'means of investing a particular set of political and social arrangements with an aura of the sacred, thereby elevating their stature and enhancing their stability ... Well established and recognised symbols, rituals, celebrations, places and values supply(ing) the society with an overarching sense of spiritual unity ... and a focal point for shared memories of struggle and survival'.<sup>18</sup> It is here argued that the Melbourne Cup is part of Australia's civil religion because it encapsulates 'Australianness' as noted above by Phillips and Smith. The fact that this 'Australianness' is often deliberately constructed and artificially disseminated does not affect its imaginative power, nor the conviction with which Australians hold to it.<sup>19</sup>

The importance of the Cup in the national psyche is also demonstrated by the fact that the first local ballet commissioned by the newly formed Australian Ballet in November 1962 was choreographer Rex Reid's 'Melbourne Cup', and in more recent years an educational video was produced in 2000 by Adult Multicultural Education Services (AMES) on the Melbourne Cup, as a 'response to the difficulties migrants face in understanding local news and current events ... extending their understanding of Australian social, political and economic events'.<sup>20</sup> The Cup's links to national and cultural identity have also been astutely exploited by Federal politicians, such as the Liberal Party's Andrew Robb and Don Randall. Robb 'nominates the first Tuesday in November as one of the Australian cultural values that aspiring migrants might have to know to become citizens',<sup>21</sup> which might suggest that drinking, gambling and manifesting an interest in horse racing are the core values that newcomers to Australia must, perforce, embrace. The Cup also features in the debate as to whether Australia should become a republic, which is a sensitive issue in the definition of national identity; in a Notice Paper dated 21 June 2006, Randall moved that 'the Queen's Birthday holiday ... be replaced by a truly national day and that this uniform national public holiday be observed on the first Tuesday in November each year'.<sup>22</sup>

### **The Australian horse racing industry**

As noted earlier, the horse has a special place in the development of Australia as a nation. Examples of veneration of the horse in Australian culture can be found in prints featured in newspapers and magazines, and pictures of horses being displayed in hotels and public buildings. Seven horses arrived with the First Fleet in 1788, and since that time countless thoroughbreds have been imported into Australia to provide not only a bloodline for the racehorse industry but also to breed stock and troop horses.<sup>23</sup> Cassidy canvasses the notion that thoroughbred racehorses are the subjects of a shared history 'linking East and West in the exchange of fine horses, against a background of constantly changing power relations'. The history and mythology surrounding the thoroughbred and its Arabian bloodline goes back to ancient Mesopotamia, where the Arab horse is traced to a sacred origin story: 'The first Arabian was a mare, the black-skinned Antelope ('Kuhaylah') created by God, saved from Ishmael's arrow by Gabriel.'<sup>24</sup> Bloodlines and the importance of pedigree are paramount in defining today's modern racehorse as a product of selective breeding that has taken place over centuries with speed, endurance and the will to win as some of the most sought-after characteristics. It is beyond the scope of this essay to explore the history of the development of today's racing thoroughbred horse. However, horse races are events where those with an interest in horses can go to watch (and perhaps even touch) these animals who have served humanity in times of both peace and war. Accessible to the general public by purchasing an entry ticket, racecourses are thus pilgrimage sites to the development of Arabian thoroughbred horses, a living testimony to the science of horse breeding.<sup>25</sup>

Even with an excellent pedigree, the success of a thoroughbred racehorse is dependent on many other variables, particularly trainers and jockeys. All of the cited works on the Melbourne Cup speak of the tradition of trainers who all aim to bring a particular horse to the peak of its racing career for the four day Melbourne Cup Spring Racing Carnival. Some trainers loom larger than others as a result of the winner(s) that they have trained, like Harry Telford, who trained Phar Lap and is part of the 'Phar Lap' legend discussed below, and Lee Freedman, who trained the record-breaking mare Makybe Diva, three-time Cup winner from 2005. Other exemplary figures are strong individualists who have trained many winners (including of the Cup) in Australia, such as Bart Cummings and

T.J. Smith.<sup>26</sup> Many punters pledge lifelong allegiance to particular trainers, only backing horses that are trained by their favourite. Their allegiance can be due to any number of reasons, including the training methods used by the trainer, the home town of the trainer and/or the location of their training track or stables, the trainer's charisma or celebrity status, the trainer's record in 'producing' Cup winners, or other tenuous links between the punter and the trainer.

This superstitious loyalty to a trainer, and belief in his or her 'luck' is part of the modern secular pilgrimage tradition which is inherited from medieval Christian religious pilgrimage, where the cult of the individual saint (usually associated with physical remains and miracles) meant that certain shrines were more popular than others.<sup>27</sup> Loyalty to a particular patron saint and a horse trainer may appear worlds apart; however both offer access to power and 'luck', respectively spiritual or secular. Racehorse owners may also share in the public's attention, though they are more tenuously linked to the horses' success. Nat Gould, a well-known late-nineteenth-century novelist who wrote several popular novels centred on horse racing, noted that 'a mysterious fascination surrounds the owner of a well-backed Cup horse, and he becomes an object of unusual interest. People gaze at him as though they were blessed with second sight or thought-reading powers, and would fain make use of them to extract information from him'.<sup>28</sup>

First among all the heroic horses beloved by Australians is Phar Lap, whose statue, erected in Australia's Bicentenary Year 1988, is the one identifiable devotional shrine at Flemington racecourse, where images and mementos of other winners are otherwise largely lacking (in contrast to the National Tennis Centre which openly honours previous Australian Open champions). Despite being born in New Zealand in 1927, since 1930 when he won the Melbourne Cup Australians have claimed the legendary Phar Lap as one of their own. After an unsuccessful shotgun attack on the way to the racecourse on Derby Day in 1930 (the Saturday race day before the Tuesday Melbourne Cup), Phar Lap is the only racehorse to be accorded police protection immediately after being attacked until the running of the Cup on the following Tuesday.<sup>29</sup> His legend grew as he became 'a symbol of heroism to a country ravaged by depression ... (and) ... his mysterious death was nothing short of a national disaster but his name and memory remain immortal'.<sup>30</sup> Phar Lap's immortality is recorded in two important reliquary sites in Australia: the Melbourne Museum and the National Museum of Australia (in Canberra). The former houses his hide, which was prepared by a firm of New York taxidermists and shipped back to Australia to go on display in 1933, and the latter has his heart on display. The skeleton went home to Phar Lap's country of birth, and is on display at Te Papa National Museum in Wellington, New Zealand. Phar Lap was one of the first five horses to be inducted into the Australian Racing Hall of Fame, which is housed at the 'Champions: Australian Racing Museum and Hall of Fame' site at Federation Square (the others were Carbine, Tulloch, Bernborough and Kingston Town). The recent establishment of this museum brought the centrality of horse racing in the Australian national ethos from the periphery of the racetrack to the centre of the Melbourne. The displays are reminiscent of religious relics (body parts of champion horses, portraits of horses, trainers and jockeys, the cups and trophies won through supreme effort).<sup>31</sup>

Phar Lap's legend is an appropriate entrée into the discussion of the religio-spiritual aspects of the Melbourne Cup, and its function as a pilgrimage event for secular Australians. The Great Depression in Australia was a time when hope was failing, and for many their hopes became focused on Phar Lap. In the four years that he raced (1928–32) the big chestnut gelding won 37 of his 51 races; moreover, his trainer Harry Telford was neither rich nor influential, and neither was Jim Pike, the jockey who rode him to most

of his victories. After winning the Agua Caliente Handicap in Mexico (at that time the American continent's richest racing prize) Phar Lap died in the United States on 5 April 1932; many Australians believed he had been poisoned. Dozens of tributes to Phar Lap poured in from the public to Harry Telford. Telford acknowledged the almost-religious power of Phar Lap in his own tribute: 'He was an angel. A human being couldn't have had more sense. He was almost human; could do anything but talk. I've never practiced idolatry, but by God I loved that horse.'<sup>32</sup> In 1983 his story was immortalized in the film, 'Phar Lap', the script of which was authored by iconic Australian playwright David Williamson.<sup>33</sup> The Australian film industry in the 1980s was mining a rich stream of history to create a national identity for an increasingly fragmented and multicultural society in the wake of 20 years of large-scale immigration; in addition to 'Phar Lap', 1981's 'Gallipoli', 1982's 'The Man from Snowy River' and 1987's 'The Lighthorsemen', all emphasized the vital role of the horse in forging the Australian identity, and linked that image to the courage and tenacity of the soldiers who fought in the First World War, drawing on the Anzac legacy.<sup>34</sup>

### The Melbourne Cup as a secular pilgrimage event

When considering the Cup as a possible context for secular pilgrimage, issues of personal and national identity are crucial. Postmodern secularized Western society has been characterized as being consumerist in nature, with people's patterns of consumption largely determining their identity.<sup>35</sup> The dominant influence of film and television, the internet and the print media has resulted in celebrities becoming powerful role models for identity construction among Western people. It is interesting to note that celebrity in Australia has until recently been almost exclusively concentrated on sport. Mandle was the first to link sport and Australian nationalism commenting that: 'Australia's national heroes are largely cricketers, tennis-players, swimmers and boxers, or even race-horses ... Phar Lap would rate more highly than any politician, Don Bradman more than any artist'.<sup>36</sup>

In this world of image, success and fashion, what has traditionally been understood to be religious has altered profoundly. For approximately 30 years sociologists of religion have noted how the Christian churches have embraced aspects of the media-saturated, consumerist culture that surrounds them, while the experience of the 'sacred', traditionally the preserve of the churches, has floated free, and attached itself to phenomena that were traditionally regarded as 'secular'. David Chidester has convincingly demonstrated that rock music, sport and iconic products, such as Coca Cola, are powerful conduits for contemporary people to encounter the sacred.<sup>37</sup>

The parallel development of traditional religious pilgrimage and modern tourism is another clear case of the sacralization of the secular. Travel, far from being a shallow recreational activity, for many people is constitutive of identity; people experience themselves as more real when encountering the 'Other' through travel. But the deregulation of the sacred has also resulted in smaller-scale experiences that are avenues to the sacred, and can be repeated:

contemporary, secularised but not de-sacralised, people undergo initiatory ritual through consumption constantly, in mini-pilgrimages to the sites of potential transformation. Selves are acquired and discarded, and *communitas*, though fragmentary, is detectable in these patterns of consumption.<sup>38</sup>

Holiday destinations and sporting arenas, along with shopping malls, are the sites to which these pilgrims flock. Central to pilgrimage (whether traditionally religious or secular) is a sacred site and/or event. In the case of the Cup, both the site and event are inextricably

linked because, since 1861, the Melbourne Cup has been run at Flemington Racecourse.<sup>39</sup> However, since then the racetrack and its surrounds, including the public enclosures, stables and transportation infrastructure, have changed so much that there is little or no physical evidence of pre-Federation days. Nevertheless, Flemington on Melbourne Cup Day is a shrine to which the secular pilgrims flock.

One of the hallmarks of any pilgrimage site is the expectation of the miraculous<sup>40</sup> and Cup day at Flemington is no exception. Whilst the writers understand that no miracles of the kind associated with Catholic Marian shrines, for example, have been witnessed at Flemington, many minor positive occurrences are routinely hailed as 'miracles'. For example, fine temperate weather for the duration of the event is in itself considered fortuitous, given Melbourne's unpredictable spring weather (rain preceding and during the event have become almost a common occurrence). Melbourne newspaper *The Age*, reporting on the fine weather experienced at the 1981 Cup, noted that 'a more propitious day, so far as weather was concerned, it would have been difficult to realize'.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, a horse with long odds winning the event is a miracle for the punters who are fortunate to place a bet on it, the horse's owners and the winning jockey. Even passing the winning post in first place does not guarantee the miraculous, because the result is dependent on the course stewards verifying the photo-finish frames, correct weight and/or the results of random swabs for banned substances.<sup>42</sup>

Traditionally, the Cup is associated with gambling and drinking to excess. Over 80% of Australians make a wager of some form on the Cup, reinforcing the observation by Nat Gould over a century earlier that, 'it becomes natural to Cup crowds to bet upon the great race as it does to business men to buy the evening papers. They regard it as part and parcel of the day's proceedings, and it cannot, in any sense of the word, be called gambling.'<sup>43</sup> This essay does not probe the role of gambling in Australian society; but certainly ritualistic and/or superstition-oriented behaviour amongst punters is well documented. This includes electing to place bets only from 'auspicious' totalisator windows or bookmakers, purchasing tickets only at certain times during the programme, placing tickets in a 'lucky' pocket or purse, and only betting on certain numbers or racing colours. Historically, the casting of lots and the consulting of oracles are both religious activities, with deities presiding over the realm of chance, such as the Greek Tyche and the Roman Fortuna.<sup>44</sup> Gambling on Cup day extends beyond those who have made the pilgrimage to Flemington itself, as around the nation workers hold office sweepstakes and cease working, whether solely to watch the Cup on television or as part of an extended Melbourne Cup lunch, manifesting a form of fragmentary *communitas*, as mentioned earlier.

At Flemington consumption of alcohol begins with the time-honoured ritual of breakfast in the Members' and public car parks (complete with cloth-covered tables, folding chairs and champagne). This is an integral part of the Cup experience for VRC Members and the public, many of whom never actually get to see the race,<sup>45</sup> being entirely caught up in celebrating. The quasi-religious nature of the breakfast is part-way between the tradition of meals which unite the faithful with the divine (such as the Christian eucharist) and the libations and toasts offered to the gods in ancient Greek ceremonies, including the Olympic Games, held in honour of Zeus Olympios.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, alcohol has a long association with the inducement of ritual altered states of consciousness, which may have religious significance. For the argument of this essay, it is most appropriate to see indulgence in alcohol on Cup Day as a gateway to liminality, relaxing the restraints of everyday existence, and the warm fellowship enjoyed by the participants as Turnerian *communitas* in a secularized setting. Further, this *communitas* radiates out from those who

are actually present at Flemington (with varying degrees of sacredness observed, intensifying in the Members' Stand, diminishing in the public car park), to the lessened, but still real, shared experience of millions via television, radio and the internet, which unifies Australia for a few moments each year.

### The religious and spiritual focus of contemporary Western culture

The religious life of late capitalist Western culture is dominated by the individual spiritual quest and by consumption, which has become the pre-eminent form that shapes the quest. This is a radical departure from the 2,000 year dominance of the Christian church and its teachings, and it has been noted that three radical social changes have brought about the decline of institutional religious affiliation and the growth of eclectic personal spiritualities from the period 1850 to the present. These are individualism, secularization and consumer capitalism.<sup>47</sup> It is difficult to separate out these three strands: secularization, famously defined by Peter Berger as 'the process whereby sectors of society are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols',<sup>48</sup> enabled individuals to make religious and lifestyle choices that moved away from the prescriptions of Christianity; and consumption became the preferred mode of self-expression once Christianity's historic distrust of this-worldly pleasure was overcome. Whereas, in the past, religion urged contemplation of the next world and the rejection of wealth and success in this world, New Age and other late capitalist self-actualization movements urge personal fulfilment in this life as the new salvation. In this heady atmosphere, wealth, celebrity and conspicuous consumption replace piety, poverty and self-denial. This type of religiosity is essentially private and personal; often people refer to themselves as 'spiritual', rather than religious.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, this development takes place in a space where the boundaries between high and low culture, between good taste and bad, and even between moral and ethical choices, have become blurred.

This results in a variety of incongruous phenomena: religions based on explicit fictions (such as *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*), spiritual quests that manifest through self-indulgence, and seemingly superficial phenomena (shopping, gossip, fashion) that are in fact extremely serious. David Lyon has argued that fashion, which may appear superficial, is in fact a core identity industry in the contemporary West: 'the idea is that self-esteem and recognition by others may be purchased over the counter'.<sup>50</sup> Mass-market capitalism has democratized the world of fashion, which was previously restricted to the wealthy. In 1861 those attending Flemington displayed a consciousness of fashion. Bernstein describes the scene thus:

[I]adies were present at that first Cup Day in bonnets and flounces, escorted by gentlemen in tightly-buttoned frock coats and beaver hats. Cabbage-tree hats and bush bears were prominent, as were settlers in moleskin trousers and leggings, or knee boots.<sup>51</sup>

Since the 1960s, fashion has played an increasingly significant role in the rituals of the Cup. Australia is a very low-key, informal society where casual clothing is the norm. This emphasizes the liminal nature of Cup Day, as it is recognized as 'one of the few times when Australians celebrate looking stylish ... on that first Tuesday in November, the dark clouds part and the elegant ladies come out to shine'.<sup>52</sup> The intersection of fashion with celebrity watching has intensified in the past two decades. Celebrities, be they actors or rock stars, or even minor figures from reality television, are the new saints and martyrs, role models for the postmodern aspirant to self-fulfilment to emulate. The beginnings of this phenomenon were observable in the 1960s when British model Jean Shrimpton ('the Shrimp') scandalized Australia with her daring appearance at the Melbourne Cup,



wearing a sleeveless mini dress without a hat or gloves. Fashion has, since the 1960s, become a crucial element of the Cup, with parades known as 'Fashion on the Field' being staged annually. Fashion retailers set up tents at Flemington and invite celebrities to be associated with them. In 2005, Eva Longoria, one of the stars of the hit American series 'Desperate Housewives', was the main attraction for the fashion and celebrity-conscious.

For locals attending the race, Australian designers are favoured, and the pilgrims thus attired provide photographic material for the women's magazines and fashion magazines of that week or month. The importance of image in contemporary society has not diminished the reverence for sporting heroes in Australian hearts, but has rather extended that reverence to the wealthy, the beautiful and the famous. In 2005, *The Australian* newspaper on Cup Day (Tuesday 1 November), as part of its extensive coverage of the Cup, included a four-page Melbourne Cup special entitled 'Fashion on the Field'. With a multitude of pictures of celebrities and the 'in' social set taken on Saturday at Derby Day (the first day of the four-day Cup Carnival), professional *fashionistas* (namely the Fashion Editor and a 'stylist' assistant) informed readers of the 'dos and don'ts' of what they should be seen wearing to the Cup in order to avoid social *gaffes*. However, the reality is that almost all of the paper's female readers attending the Cup would have already decided upon their choice of outfit some time before the big day. There is also the implicit, but unstated, fact that the *cognoscenti* have no need for recourse to such sartorial instructions: the list is for the novice racegoers, the socially inept, and perhaps also aimed at tourists who would be ignorant of the *mores* of acceptable Cup dress. Peake indicates that this extension of the realm of fashion to 'ordinary' women was part of racing traditions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He also perceptively argues that in the 'postmodern' racing era (when the race itself is no longer the primary focus) the racing industry has continued to thrive economically by marketing its events to women and those who are interested in the 'total package' rather than the race itself.<sup>53</sup>

It could also be argued that the Melbourne Cup forms a cultural nexus for Australia through the exploitation of technology. Baudrillard has asserted that late or postmodern society is defined by the retreat of reality in the face of increasing images and simulacra.<sup>54</sup> Mass media and information technologies extend the value of an experience like the Cup, by reproducing it through image and text. Being at the Cup is the primary secular experience of the sacred, but the ritual observance of the Cup in workplaces described above is more like the performance of religious devotion for the ordinary believer. Turner argued that pilgrimage involved liminality (being out of your everyday routine) and *communitas*. Both of these phenomena are observable in the breaking of work routines to gather and watch the Cup and in the buying of sweepstake tickets and celebrating wins (even of \$2 or \$5). Recent research by the Australian government also provides evidence supporting this contention: the report on expatriate Australians notes Cup Day as one of the crucial days for Australians abroad to congregate, for a Melbourne Cup lunch and the viewing of the race, whether live or at some later hour due to time zones. Technology also has transformed the process of betting and winning prizes, and the earlier discussion of fashion, branding and celebrity all dovetails elegantly with the Baudrillardian assertion of the retreat of the real and the gradual advance of the hyperreal.<sup>55</sup>

Postmodern consumer spiritualities and their secular counterparts are bombarded with media images of lottery and Lotto wins ('the big red ball that makes dreams come true', and 'spend the rest of your life' are clearly quasi-religious slogans), because this-worldly fulfilment has replaced ascetic self-denial as the desired goal. That atmosphere of expectation and the possibility of riches is a crucial aspect of the Melbourne Cup. Joy is a potent emotion and points to the Cup devotees' belief in magic and miracles;

the possibility of a big win is ever-present. Worthington's research on the 'Melbourne Cup effect' on the Australian stock market 'provides some empirical evidence to support the conjecture that Melbourne Cup Tuesday is associated with a higher mean market return than either other Tuesdays, or other days'.<sup>56</sup>

It is also important to note the economic importance of the Cup to the Victorian economy, particularly as Melbourne promotes itself as the 'Event Capital of Australia'. In 2005, the four-day Spring Racing Carnival (with the Cup as the jewel in the crown) returned a gross economic benefit to Victoria of \$524.3 million as part of the direct and indirect economic multiplier effect. Moreover, the Spring Racing Carnival attracted 730,000 attendees, of whom 25,602 were from international destinations and 76,042 were interstate visitors. Careful examination of Racing Victoria's documents provides substantial support for the argument of this essay that the Melbourne Cup (and associated events) is crucial for Australian identity, and that the secular pilgrims that flock to it are motivated by the yearning to experience the sacred through participating in the golden world of celebrity, wealth and conspicuous consumption. Almost AU\$39 million was spent on corporate packages in 2005, with more than AU\$20 million being spent on fashion purchases across the four days of the Carnival.<sup>57</sup> This is also evidence for Wayne Peake's contention that racing in Australia has been reinvented as an entertainment spectacle, generating an effervescence among participants that is quite separate from its 'golden age' ideals.<sup>58</sup> Peake does not venture into the issues of identity formation or the quasi-religious nature of Cup attendance, but we would argue that the effervescence generated by entertainment events of this type is a secularized functional equivalent of the religious *communitas* found at traditional religious pilgrimage sites.

## Conclusion

This essay has probed several relationships that are of crucial importance for Australian identity, as understood historically and in the contemporary context. The first of these is the generally low level of formal religiosity among Australians, from their convict beginnings to the present where approximately 9% of Australians attend church on a regular basis,<sup>59</sup> and their passionate interest in sport in general, and for the purposes of this essay, racing in particular. The significance of horse racing, and the Melbourne Cup as the race *par excellence* for Australians, was elucidated by using Victor Turner's (1973) model of pilgrimage to analyse the behaviours of race-goers and others participating in Cup-related activities such as champagne breakfasts, gambling and stopping work to watch the race. It was argued that Turner's *schema*, which characterizes a pilgrim as one who separates from his or her profane everyday life and enters a liminal state, was appropriate to racegoers and watchers who dress up, eat and drink to excess, place bets in the hope of 'a big win', and suspend their daily activities (primarily work) to experience *communitas*, an effervescent fellow-feeling.

Turner's *schema* was originally developed in the context of traditional religion. This essay has also explored the relationship between the sacred and the secular, religion and popular culture, in late or postmodern Western consumerist society. It has been demonstrated that the place of institutional religion in Western culture has profoundly altered since the mid-nineteenth century, with secularization, individualism and consumer capitalism eroding traditional religion and giving rise to individual 'privatised spiritualities'.<sup>60</sup> These are themselves consumables, and spiritual seekers are driven by the desire for self-fulfilment, a desire that usually involves this-worldly success and riches, glamour and celebrity, as traditional religion's appeal to asceticism and self-denial

gradually loses its authority. What results is a radically deregulated 'sacred', which now manifests through many aspects of life that were traditionally understood to be secular, such as shopping and rock music, travel, popular culture and sport. Consequently, the Cup functions as a medium for the experience of the sacred, which we argue involves vindication of both individual, personal identity and *communitas* which reinforces Australian national and cultural identity. Turner's pilgrims returned home and were reintegrated into their community with evidence of their transformed status. For postmodern secular pilgrims, the experience is one of many such minor transformative rituals; the consumerist nature of their quest for self-fulfilment demands that such experiences be constantly repeated.<sup>61</sup>

Finally, horses and racing contributed substantially to Australian self-understanding in the early colonial period. It is interesting to see how that part of Australian history both reinforces and undermines modernist national understandings. Australians have a strong self-identity; but it is largely based on the mockery of, and undermining of, aspects of character that others, Americans or English people, for example, might admire. Australians have valorised drinking and gambling, being 'laid-back' and defying authority, informality and irreligiosity.<sup>62</sup> Their heroes include bushranger Ned Kelly, the Anzacs of Gallipoli in the First World War and Phar Lap. It could be observed that all these heroes were ultimately 'losers': heroic achievers who died before their time. Australian icons persist in being somewhat iconoclastic. It is thus to be expected that an event such as the Melbourne Cup is not only beloved by the average punter, but is actually invoked by politicians as exemplifying the values and goals that define Australia.<sup>63</sup> These values appear to be those of drinking, gambling and partying to excess, which are perfectly postmodern in their collapsing of high and low culture, moral taste and aesthetic sensibility.<sup>64</sup> The deepest values and commitments of a nation are, of necessity, quasi-religious; the Melbourne Cup as postmodern pilgrimage offers contemporary Australians a pilgrimage to the core of their identity as a nation, and an uncritical vindication of all that it comprises.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Cusack, 'Religion in Australian Society', 29–32.
- <sup>2</sup> Dunstan, *Sports*, 49.
- <sup>3</sup> Twain, 'Following the Equator', 161–2.
- <sup>4</sup> Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland*, 88.
- <sup>5</sup> Digance, 'Religious and Secular Pilgrimage'.
- <sup>6</sup> Cashman, *Sport in the National Imagination*, 33.
- <sup>7</sup> Dunstan, *Sports*, 43.
- <sup>8</sup> Cashman, *Sport in the National Imagination*, 36.
- <sup>9</sup> Painter and Waterhouse, *The Principal Club*, 3, 17.
- <sup>10</sup> Peake, 'Significance of Unregistered Proprietary Pony Racing', 2.
- <sup>11</sup> Painter and Waterhouse, *The Principal Club*, 19.
- <sup>12</sup> Bernstein, *First Tuesday in November*, 22.
- <sup>13</sup> Shepherd, *Australian Sporting Almanac*.
- <sup>14</sup> Bernstein, *First Tuesday in November*, 138, 284, 22.
- <sup>15</sup> Martin, *Robert Menzies*.

- <sup>16</sup> Phillips and Smith, 'What is "Australian"?'  
<sup>17</sup> Bellah, 'Civil Religion in America'.  
<sup>18</sup> McClay 'The Soul of a Nation', 9.  
<sup>19</sup> Crouter, 'Beyond Bellah'.  
<sup>20</sup> AMES, *Easynews*.  
<sup>21</sup> P. Karvelas, 'Race that Stops Nation Could Stop Your Citizenship'. *The Weekend Australian*, April 29–30, 2005, 8.  
<sup>22</sup> Hansard, No.109, June 21, 2006, at [www.aph.gov.au/house/info/notpaper](http://www.aph.gov.au/house/info/notpaper).  
<sup>23</sup> Cashman, *Sport in the National Imagination*, 34; Bernstein, *First Tuesday in November*, 149.  
<sup>24</sup> Cassidy, 'Arab Dimensions to British Racehorse Breeding', 13, 18.  
<sup>25</sup> Edwards, *The Encyclopedia of the Horse*.  
<sup>26</sup> Painter and Waterhouse, *The Principal Club*, 177–9.  
<sup>27</sup> Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*.  
<sup>28</sup> Gould, *Landed at Last*, 207.  
<sup>29</sup> Cavanough and Davies, *The Melbourne Cup*.  
<sup>30</sup> de Lore, *Melbourne Cup Winners*, 45.  
<sup>31</sup> [www.museum.vic.gov.au](http://www.museum.vic.gov.au); Champions Australian Racing Museum and Hall of Fame, [www.racingmuseum.com.au](http://www.racingmuseum.com.au).  
<sup>32</sup> [www.museum.vic.gov.au](http://www.museum.vic.gov.au).  
<sup>33</sup> Maslin, "'Phar Lap'".  
<sup>34</sup> Rita Kempley. 'The Lighthorsemen'. *Washington Post*, April 30, 1988. [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/thelighthorsemenpgkempley\\_a0ca13.htm](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/thelighthorsemenpgkempley_a0ca13.htm). It is interesting to note that a film about the first Melbourne Cup winner was also made in the 1980s. 'Archer' (1985) was a made-for-television feature (also known as 'Archer's Adventure') directed by Denny Lawrence and starring popular Australian television actor Brett Climo. As virtually nothing is known about Archer, the story is substantially fiction, with Archer's historically-attested victory in the 1861 Cup as the climax.  
<sup>35</sup> Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland*, 79.  
<sup>36</sup> Mandle, 'Cricket and Australian Nationalism', 224.  
<sup>37</sup> Demerath, 'Varieties of Sacred Experience', 4; Chidester, 'The Church of Baseball'.  
<sup>38</sup> Quotation from Cusack and Digance, "'Shopping for a Self'", 231.  
<sup>39</sup> de Lore, *Melbourne Cup Winners*, 10.  
<sup>40</sup> Digance, 'Religious and Secular Pilgrimage'.  
<sup>41</sup> T. Bourke, 'Looking Back on a Racy Century'. *The Age*, October 2, 2004. [www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/10/01/1096527928498.html?from=storylhs](http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/10/01/1096527928498.html?from=storylhs).  
<sup>42</sup> 'The Track', at [www.abc.net.au/thetrack/default.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/thetrack/default.htm).  
<sup>43</sup> Superstitious gambling practices have been observed first-hand over a period of many years by Justine Digance, who has worked part-time at the on-course totalisator in both Sydney and Melbourne (including in the Members' Stand on Melbourne Cup Day).  
<sup>44</sup> Windross, 'The Luck of the Draw', 67–8; Rankin, 'The History of Probability', 484. [http://www.lonelyplanet.com/journeys/feature/melbourne\\_cup05.cfm](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/journeys/feature/melbourne_cup05.cfm).  
<sup>45</sup> Cartledge, 'The Greek Religious Festivals'.  
<sup>46</sup> Carrette and King, *Selling Spirituality*, 19–20; Bruce, *God is Dead*, 10–26.  
<sup>47</sup> Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion*, 107.  
<sup>48</sup> Possamai, *Religion and Popular Culture*, 121–33; Carrette and King, *Selling Spirituality*, 53.  
<sup>49</sup> Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland*, 12.  
<sup>50</sup> Bernstein, *The First Tuesday in November*, 15.  
<sup>51</sup> 'Australian Traditions', [www.convictcreations.com/culture/traditions.htm](http://www.convictcreations.com/culture/traditions.htm).  
<sup>52</sup> Peake, 'The Significance of Unregistered Proprietary Pony Racing', 9, 13.  
<sup>53</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulations*.  
<sup>54</sup> 'They Still Call Australia Home' at [www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/legcon\\_ctte/expatso3/report/index.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/legcon_ctte/expatso3/report/index.htm); Possamai, *Religion and Popular Culture*, 135–55.  
<sup>55</sup> Carrette and King, *Selling Spirituality*, 125; Worthington, *National Exuberance*, 7.  
<sup>56</sup> Racing Victoria Ltd, *Spring Racing Carnival Economic Benefit Report 2005*. 2006. [www.springracingcarnival.com.au/media/documents/SRCexec.pdf](http://www.springracingcarnival.com.au/media/documents/SRCexec.pdf).  
<sup>57</sup> Peake, 'The Significance of Unregistered Proprietary Pony Racing'.  
<sup>58</sup> Bouma and Lennon, 'Estimating the Extent of Religious and Spiritual Activity'.  
<sup>59</sup> Carrette and King, *Selling Spirituality*, 47.

<sup>61</sup> Turner, 'The Center Out There'; Cusack and Digance, "'Shopping for a Self"'.

<sup>62</sup> White, *Inventing Australia*.

<sup>63</sup> Karvelas, 'Race that Stops Nation Could Stop Your Citizenship', 8.

<sup>64</sup> Possamai, *Religion and Popular Culture*, 19.

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