

Documentary Film Review

Hallowed Be Thy Game, by Mark Dowd. An sfx production for channel 4. Aired: 8pm Sunday 30th January 2005. Presented and directed by Mark Dowd. Devised and produced by Andrew Higgin.

Mark Dowd, the presenter of the documentary *Hallowed Be Thy Game*, employs language often associated with Christian evangelicalism when he claims that he has been 'a born-again believer' of Manchester United Football club 'since the age of eight'. By peppering his documentary with such proclamations of devotion, Dowd draws attention to the ways in which some sports commentators and numerous fans of the 'beautiful game of football', adopt language, embrace sentiments, and cultivate rituals often associated with the behaviours and beliefs of those who consider themselves to be followers of any given canonical religious movement.

One can assert that when football supporters integrate such 'religious' discourse into their language, they are simply conveying their adoration of their chosen football team or sports hero. Similarly, it could be argued that newspaper sports writers who immerse their prose with religious hyperbole do so in order to catch the attention of readers. From a more cynical standpoint, such eye-grabbing use of religious terminology sells papers and boosts television ratings.

While Dowd acknowledges that many naysayers will dismiss the notion that football is a form of religion, his documentary presents a sensitive and multi-layered portrait surrounding the mass appeal and spiritual undertones that 'the beautiful game' generates. He anchors much of his discussion on the possible religious dimensions of football by asking the question: 'Were people right to refer to football as the modern-day religion?'

Rather than position himself as a journalist who analyses the possible 'religious' phenomena of football from the standpoint of an objective observer, Dowd acknowledges his own 'worship' of the 'beautiful game' by recalling the match when his beloved football team, Manchester United, played against Bayern Munich in the 1999 European Cup final. Dowd was the only member of the press corps wearing a Manchester United Football Club shirt. He confesses that as he watched his team struggle to claw their way back from a 2-1 deficit he prayed. Yes, Mark Dowd prayed. And he was not the only Manchester United fan who sought divine intervention in the hope that his team's fortunes

would turn around. The chaplain of Manchester United, Rev John Boyers, admits that in the counting seconds of the match he made the following petition: 'Well Lord, if it's part of your intention, we really do need your intervention'. Interestingly, rather than pray to Sir Matt Busby, the now deceased legendary manager of Manchester United, Rev John Boyers prays to his Christian God. Rev Boyers' testimony reveals that the distinction between explicit and what Edward Bailey identifies as implicit religious practices may not be as distinct or as separate as is often presented.

While Dowd is not as forthcoming in detailing who he directed his prayers toward, his recollection of the moment when the captain of Manchester United victoriously hoisted the European Cup in the air after his team secured a 3–2 win over Bayern Munich, is forever imprinted upon his memory. Whether this 'miracle' of Manchester United winning such an important match arose because of an act of divine intervention, or because Manchester United were able to secure two goals during the injury time because of their skill as a team, is an issue that Dowd does not labour upon. He does however emphasize the spiritual dimensions underscoring the game of football, and he does so by focusing upon the euphoria and team spirit that pervaded the stadium when Manchester United became European champions.

Dowd's documentary also details how some football pundits merge the practises of secular and non-secular forms of religious expression together. When David Beckham broke the metatarsal bone in his foot, the editorial team of *The Sun* newspaper sanctioned that a picture of Beckham's injured foot be printed on the front cover of their paper. They then asked their readers to pray for his healing so he could participate in the 2002 World Cup championship. To add further religious credence to this nationwide call for divine intervention, editors of *The Sun* newspaper solicited the help of a clergyman to guide this national call for prayer. Dowd could have taken the route of ridiculing *The Sun's* 'spiritual' cry for the healing of Beckham's foot. Instead, he again chose to highlight the 'religious' undertones underlining *The Sun's* initiative.

Dowd's apparent sensitivity towards those who spiritualize the game of football at times simplifies the purposes of such 'religious' initiatives. In regard to *The Sun's* campaign, Dowd could have adopted a healthy dose of critical analysis by focusing upon the possible motives underscoring *The Sun's* efforts to spearhead a nationwide call for prayer. For instance, Dowd could have raised the possibility that the editors and management team of *The Sun* are in the business of selling papers. It is therefore not implausible that their commitment to making a profit may well have motivated, or at least played a role in fuelling their 'spiritual' campaign.

Notwithstanding this critique, it is fair to say that Dowd interviews a wide range of people as he pursues his investigation into whether football is a new religion. Scholars, football pundits, managers, players, writers and fans from various religious backgrounds are all called upon to share their viewpoints on

the spiritual significance of football. An Islamic Burnley football fan decides to hold his wedding on the grounds of his favourite football team. One fan creates a virtual shrine to his football team out of his home. The Maradona Church, devoted to the worship of former Argentinean football striker Maradona, is also featured in Dowd's documentary. People from all walks of life, and followers of differing explicit and implicit religions find meaning and purpose through football.

While celebrating the variety of rituals which some fans attach to the game of football is undoubtedly a central concern of his documentary, Dowd also recognizes that as a sport, football can build a sense of community for the common good of many, and at the same time it has a force and a power that can 'unleash tremendous tribal violence'. Personally, I would have liked Dowd to have expanded upon what this 'tremendous tribal violence' reveals about the relationship between the spirituality of football, and the sectarian, racist, sexist and homophobic sentiments that sometimes pervade football culture. Can the religious dimension of football ever transcend any given form of prejudice? Is there a correlation between football violence and religious expression? Does the religion of football reflect the socio-economic divisions of a country? Can any religion be free of 'tribal violence'?

Ultimately, the overall tone of Dowd's documentary focuses on the spiritually uplifting elements of football. At the end of his documentary, Dowd recalls the euphoria filling the stadium when Manchester United won the European Cup final in 1999. He shares that in this moment of 'powerful communion and transcendence' one could get a glimpse of 'a portent of what lies beyond this life'. As I pondered on Dowd's comments, I could not help but wonder how inclusive this moment of euphoria would be if a spectator were not a supporter of any given football team. It would seem to me that in order for everyone to enjoy this moment of celebration, they would have to feel as if they belong to the same team. Could it be that football, like many other religions, ultimately establishes a set of requirements that can bar non-believers from experiencing a sense of belonging if they do not wholeheartedly buy into its praxes and tenets? Does the game of football and its apparent habitual connotations allow its followers to forge an identity that is sacred? Edward Bailey, one of the scholars interviewed for Dowd's program suggests: 'If it's habitual, it's to do with our identity. Identity is sacred, it's our innermost, deepest self. Isn't that sacred?'

Dowd's documentary presents those who are interested in studying secular forms of religion, with a number of provocative questions to consider. In this regard, Dowd's documentary makes for worthwhile, if not challenging viewing.

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