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Diana the Divine
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There was much to disturb a rational thinker in the life, death and mourning of Princess Diana three years ago. We might consider the perverse family dynamics of the House of Windsor (the Queen and her family); or the role of the paparazzi. But we probably should be more concerned that the death of a good-hearted though often silly young woman could produce such an overwhelming expression of public sentiment. Why? Did it not give the lie to the often expressed notion that the British are so committed to their stiff upper lips they are incapable of feeling? Actually, it revealed ancient religious notions, predating even Christianity, in operation today.

Before Christianity reached northern Europe, many cultures maintained the notion of the sacrificial monarch. This monarch's body expressed the health of the society, so if things weren't going well, he was the ready (and supposedly willing) sacrifice. When Christianity came on the scene, it connected with this myth in predictable ways, producing the notion of the Christic King. This monarch is the meeting point between heaven and earth within the community. God's representative, like Christ, bears the sins of his people. His talents may be considered godly, and his death a renewing sacrifice.

To serve his role, this King is considered by scholars as having two bodies. On the one hand, he manifests the body politic. In that sense, the king is a function that never dies. On the other hand, the king is the body natural. This body suffers and will eventually die. But in the meantime it is the physical point of contact between God and man, and enjoys divine powers of healing.

Where does Diana fit? Queen Elizabeth had long given up her role as "body natural." A modern monarch hardly wants to be considered divine, and one as restrained in her own feelings as Elizabeth surely didn't want to commit to actually touching and supposedly healing specific ailments in her people.

But the "body politic" isn't very appealing. Diana, by contrast, was notoriously and gloriously touchy-feely. She loved to meet and make real contact with people. And given Britain's long history of monarchy, it is not perhaps tremendously surprising to find some Britons, even before her death, imagining that she somehow helped them in their physical and spiritual lives. When Diana died in a way that might be considered the society's responsibility (hounded to death to fulfill our insatiable need for images of her), it was a short step for some Britons to see her as the Christic "body natural" sacrificed for us. The seas of tributes around her home at Kensington Palace made her death a public and spiritual communion embodied in flowers.

Diana's interment on an island out of the public view confirmed her, in British myth, as the King gone to return in time of need, that archetypal sacrificial king, King Arthur. But can Diana really come again? The tabloid press will surely tell.

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