

Sport as Religion: An Overused and Overanalyzed Metaphor

“Yet baseball’s widespread appeal is not found simply in the drama that takes place on the field during particular games or even a specific series. The charm that baseball holds in our social consciousness is not accidental, in the quirks of fate that affect a ball club, nor circumstantial, in the heroic exploits of all-star caliber plays and players. Rather, baseball exhibits a fundamentally *religious* power, the force of which can restore the character of our American culture.”

- Thomas F. Dailey, *Believing in Baseball*

For Americans, sports provide an escape from the grind of daily life. Athletes are perceived as heroes, gracing their respective court or field with precision and accuracy. It is this perceived heroism that which gives rise to a modern debate: Because sport plays such a powerful role in our lives on a regular basis, modern scholars suggest that sport is a religion. On the surface, this conclusion makes sense: games are set in divine stadiums and arenas, players say pregame prayers, “gods” act as superstars and “high councils” set and interpret rules.¹ While several metaphoric elements exist between sport and religion, sports fans and those that are religious in the traditional sense worship entirely different elements. Therefore, sport and religion cannot be interrelated entities; instead, the roles of sport and the role of religion are mutually exclusive of one another. Sport lacks a central “Bible,” current scholarly literature ignores participation and recreation and sport simply cannot be a substitute for organized worship.

This discussion has strong implication for the sports fan as well as the religiously inclined. This comparison has the potential to change our understanding of both sport and religion. At its root, sports are fun activities, with little implication but of providing a

¹ Robert J. Higgs, *God in the Stadium: Sports and Religion in America* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 19.

diversion. Of course, winning is the priority depending on the level of competition. Religion, conversely, is rooted in strong faith and dedication. Many sports fans claim religiosity as far as the teams in which they follow, implying a connection between fan, team and athlete. However, this claim changes how sports are viewed in our sports-driven culture. Because religion is a powerful force, one based upon both historical and divine traditions, the comparison instantly demands higher stakes. Sport is no longer fun and games. Sport is no longer about winning and losing. Instead, sport now contains supernatural elements.

Seeking an overarching definition for religion is complex. Most religions, however, include some sort of belief in a supernatural being (or beings), prayers and communication with that being, transcendent realities that might include a heaven or hell, a distinction between the sacred and profane and between ritual and sacred objects and a community bound by its adherence to these elements.² Religion, of course, is based upon active worship. Acts explains:

So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2:41-47 Revised Standard Edition)

It is this active worship that bonds common believers. Acts shows the “inner life of the community,” with four distinct elements making up an idyllic Christian community:

² Monica Duffy Toft, "Get Robert J. Higgs, *God in the Stadium: Sports and Religion in America* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 99.

teaching of the apostles, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayers.³ The temple was the central source of community, where those that believed in the same thing – Christological thought – gathered to praise God and participate in activities encouraged as such by the Bible. In the Christian tradition, the Bible provides a backbone for how Christians are supposed to worship and respond to Christ.

Whilst the Bible is the cornerstone of Christian thought and discussion, sport lacks a central spiritual source. Sports sociologist Harry Edwards stated thirteen essential elements that religion shares with sport, the first of which is that sport “*has a body of formally stated beliefs, accepted on faith by great masses of people.*”⁴ Clearly drawing a parallel to the Bible, Edwards is referring to the fact that rulebooks exist to maintain order in organized sports. Fans exhibit “faith” in the rules because they have no choice. Rules are in place simply to maintain a sense of order; in no way can a rulebook be considered a spiritual existence. Great masses accept these rulebooks and beliefs because tradition is passed from generation to generation, hereby allowing the masses to “accept on faith.” Whereas Christianity maintains a central supernatural being, God and the relation between Jesus Christ and the Father, sport lacks such a connection. Religious faith is one thing – believing in the interrelatedness between a historical and divine supernatural existence – whereas sporting faith is quite another. From where does this sporting faith originate?

Much of the scholarly analysis regarding sport and religion only interprets spectatorship and ignores the core of athletics: participation and recreation. Muscular

³ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Sacra Pagina Series: The Acts of the Apostles*, ed. S.J. Daniel J. Harrington, Vol. 5 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 56-63.

⁴ Charles S. Prebish, "Religion and Sport: Convergence or Identity," in *Religion and Sport: Meaning of Sacred and Profane*, 57-59 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993), 57-59.

Christianity refers to how Christians interact and engage with recreation: "... a good thing to have strong and well-exercised bodies ... a man's body is given him to be trained and brought into subjection."⁵ Sport is a builder of moral character, especially for males according to muscular Christianity premises. Youth sports often begin as moral character builders, reflecting playful, joyful ideals, but later become intense endeavors for those participating as children become older. Sport geared for children are highly rationalized activities that are typically organized by coaches and parents hoping to set achievable goals for their participating youngsters.⁶

Youth sports have the potential to be competitive endeavors. George Santayana reflected on America's competitiveness, saying that "[America is] a perpetual football match, a brave struggle with no purpose." Santayana's comparison sheds light on how the competitive individual views life as a zero-sum game. Competition promotes "ruthlessness and selfishness" rather than moral character. According to Paul's letter to the Corinthians (9:24-27): "I press forward to the finish line for the prize. Don't you know that of all who compete in a race only one wins the prize? So I run hard. When I fight, I don't shadow box."⁷ Paul's letter was about working relentlessly and competitively to seek the "prize." The Apostle was encouraging his disciples to fight with all their might for the Corinthian church. This Bible passage is not based on any biblical figures' athletic identity. Paul wasn't speaking directly to athletes. Consequently, because

⁵ Tony Ladd and A James Mathisen, *Muscular Christianity: Evangelical Protestants and the Development of American Sport* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 15.

⁶ Steven J. Overman, *The Influence of the Protestant Ethic on Sport and Recreation* (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 1997), 244-255

⁷ *ibid*, 92-96.

the Bible has little to say about athletics directly⁸, the comparison between sport and religion must begin elsewhere.

The Super Bowl is one example that has received attention in terms of drawing a religion and sports discussion. There is no question that Super Bowl Sunday possesses innate power over the American population in terms of pop culture appeal and for the fans of each respective team, the game itself.

As a sporting event, the Super Bowl represents the season's culmination of a major American game. As a popular spectacle, it encourages endorsement by politicians and incorporates elements of nationalism. And as a cultural festival, it commands vast allegiance while dramatizing and reinforcing the religious myths of national innocence and apotheosis.⁹

Joseph L. Price cites "evidence" for a comparison. Often, prior to kickoff, "heroes of faith who have gone before" are remembered, and "personalities from each team portrayed as superheroes, as demigods." After kickoff, the game is about the conquest of territory with one team "invading foreign land" with the goal of scoring into the opposing team's end zone. There are several biblical references to conquering of territory. For example, Joshua, who was appointed the leader of the Israelites following Moses' death, conquered Jericho at the request of God. However, this comparison may only take us so far in suggesting that sport *is* a religion. After all, comparing the goal of a football game to Joshua's motivation does little except suggest that both parties want to win, albeit in entirely different ways.

Take America's National Pastime, for example, baseball, which is often compared to religion:

⁸ Paul's letters share the most compelling passages about sport and religion. Paul utilizes metaphors of the "crown" and himself as a "shadow boxer," among others.

⁹ Joseph L. Price, "Super Bowl as Religious Festival," in *Sport and Religion*, ed. Shirl J. Hoffman, 15 (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics Books, 1992), 15.

In this country, where the secular is frequently imbued with religious significance, baseball, the national pastime, may be said to serve as the American religion. Indeed, our vocabulary is filled with references likening baseball and the places it is played to religion and religious practice. Discredited for its epic inaccuracies, Alfred Goodwill Spalding's *Base Ball: America's National Game* is nevertheless advertised as "baseball's first Bible," and its author as "the baseball messiah." The great, old ballparks, both those still standing and the mythic homes of long departed teams, are spoken of with the awe generally reserved for the great cathedrals of Europe.¹⁰

Price and the Super Bowl as well as Newman and the "Church of Baseball" rely on a crucial argument in order to suggest the interrelatedness of two very different subjects: metaphor. Metaphor is powerful, yet some metaphor encourages impossible connection. Metaphor simply suggests how sport is *like* religion. In no way does metaphor suggest how a religious individual can "convert" to sport as a separate religion. When scholars suggest that sport *is* a religion, this assumption must be questioned. Worship cannot occur simply in sacred space that is a stadium. It would be absurd to proclaim the study of literature as a new religion, with lecture halls as the place of worship and certain students with extraordinary academic ability as supernatural figures.¹¹ It is still appropriate, however, to discuss the connectedness of sport and religion. But, this analysis must be grounded in the basis of modern religion.

Denomination aside, it is impossible to worship sport as a substitute for organized religion. However, sport has the potential to lend insights into how worshippers praise God during times of organized worship:

"As a lived metaphor analogous to but not a substitute for traditional spirituality and formal religion, sports offer insights into the experience of the transcendent, the excellence of human ability, the impact of beliefs on actions and morality, the benefits and responsibilities of community, the role of ritual, the importance of language, the sacredness of houses of worship, the importance of history and

¹⁰ Roberta Newman, "The American Church of Baseball and the National Baseball Hall of Fame," *Nine* 9, no. 10 (2001): 46-47.

¹¹ Robert J. Higgs and Michael C. Braswell, *An Unholy Alliance: The Sacred and Modern Sports* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004).

tradition, and the dynamics of discipleship.”¹²

It is no question that venues play a strong influence on the sporting experience for both competitor and spectator. As in Acts 2:41-47, a group of common believers are bound by common tradition. In the case of sport, the commonality of sport allows fans and participants not only the pursuit of their sporting goals. The metaphor also shares a perspective of how religion is structured.

While diminishing the sport *is* religion conversation, it is important to understand that there are elements of religion inevitably present in sport. Athletes pray to their Gods, carrying out various superstitious.¹³ Religion also plays a prevalent role in the lives of athletes, perhaps a reason why the sport and religion discussion receives such widespread academic attention. One such example of this is baseball star Shawn Green, known for his devout Jewishness.¹⁴ Green, known for publicly announcing his struggle between job/team and religious/personal commitments, represented a larger issue within American sports celebrity culture. This internal conflict, albeit one of few that has been made public, represents the powerful nature of religion – even in the wake of sports played at the highest level.

Sport is largely incompatible with our modern understanding of religion. The Bible is the basis for Christology, and we simply do not have the historical testament or the divine Gods to justify the worship of sport in the absence of our current understanding of religion. Sport and religion are two mutually exclusive elements, with

¹² Thomas F. Dailey, O.S.F.S. "Believing in Baseball: The Religious Power of Our National Pastime," *Logos*, 2003: 65-66.

¹³ M. Kenneth Brody, "Institutionalized Sport as Quasi-Religion: Preliminary Considerations," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 1979: 7-8.

¹⁴ David J. Leonard, "To Play or Pray? Shawn Green and His Choice over Atonement," *An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*, 2007: 150-154.

some guiding themes overlapping. To say that sport *is* religion affects both those on and off the field, as it instantly discourages one of sport's principle elements – diversion – and demands higher stakes. Sport has the potential to explain religion's goals and motivations, and religion has the potential to do the same for sport. But the relationship ends there.