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The Relationship of Sport and Religion

“It is clear that the more closely we analyze the mystique of sports, psychologically and functionally, the more we tend to use religious language to describe it. And no wonder: from its beginning, athletics was regarded as a religious cult...”

-Cornish Rodgers, *The Christian Century*

Much of our society is infatuated with sport. The number of people who tune in to the emotionally captivating NCAA basketball tournament or the World Series indicates that sport is an integral part of American culture, just as religion is to many people. Due to society’s focus on and love of sports, some say that sport and religion are comparable. Does that mean that instead of attending Sunday worship, we can turn our televisions to the FOX station and bow down to NFL superstars? No, we should think of sport as possessing religious elements, but not *as* a religion. Catherine Albanese applies four “C’s” to religious life (creed, code, cultus, community) which also heavily pertain to the world of sports. Sport may influence our lives to the point that we experience radical change, similar to how religion can affect us. There are “proverbs” of sport such as “champions are made, not born” that become engrained in a sports fan’s memory just as proverbs from the Bible, for example, “whatsoever a man sows, that he shall also reap,” do in a Christian’s mind. Also, such big-time events as the Final Four and Super Bowl are festivals that not only possess aspects similar to that of religious gatherings, but their existence may have roots in religion and faith.

Albanese’s 4 C’s provide us a basis for studying religion. She describes a creed as an authoritative statement of belief made by the group. Religion is also expressed in

codes, that is to say, statements of rules that govern the behavior of the group. The cultus is an aggregate of the ritual forms in a religious tradition. The last “C,” community, is the binding together of individuals who share similar creeds, codes and cultus.¹

Albanese’s points coincide with what can be found in the world of sports.

Sports, organized or not, professional or amateur, invoke a two-part creed. In American culture, winning is generally considered to be the most important aspect of sports and competition. Success is not achieved through losing. Also, hard work, dedication, and perseverance are the main contributors to athletic prowess. In sum, the statement of belief is that, if a team or individual has some ability, sustained effort, commitment, and determination, will result in success and victory.

Codes exist to show how athletes and fans alike are to conduct themselves. For instance, gambling is forbidden and strongly looked down upon in the world of sports. Pete Rose, the former player/manager who finally admitted to betting on games of which he was a part, is currently banned from Hall of Fame induction despite having 3,000 hits to his credit. Along these same lines, athletes are to promote a sense of team unity. Recently, NFL receiver Terrell Owens was determined to have violated this code due to statements he made to the media and because of his behavior and attitudes towards his teammates and coaches. As a consequence, Owens was suspended indefinitely and most likely will never return to his former team. As for fans, a code exists in the manner in which they support their favorite teams. They are expected to support their team through good and hard times, or they are subject to being labeled as infamous “fair weather fans.” In addition, proper fan behavior at games has become an increasingly relevant code as poor conduct at athletic events has become an issue of late.

¹ Charles S. Prebish, *Sport and Religion* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993) 4-7

Extremely important to sport culture is the cultus. Rituals themselves seem to celebrate various sporting achievements and are used to recognize the competition as a whole. At the conclusion of the NCAA National Championship basketball game, it is tradition for the victorious team to cut down the nets. In hockey, after a player scores three goals in one contest, commonly referred to as a hat trick, tradition calls for fans to throw their hats onto the ice. In football, players often get down on one knee and point to the sky as if to thank God for their big play or perform their own choreographed, ritual dance. Tennis players meet at the net to shake hands after a match. After soccer games, players shake hands and often exchange jerseys with members of the other team. Cultuses are found throughout the sports world, whether men or women are competing. These rituals and traditions are comparable to religious customs such as giving each third grader a Bible to mark a point in their Sunday school studies, holding a ceremony to recognize confirmation, and having communion to focus us on the centrality of the relationship between the believer and Christ.

The last “C,” the community, can be thought of in different ways within sports. A community is established when there is closeness between a team and its fans. Supporters feel welcome in their community, and feel a common bond with those around them and identify with the athletes. Two of the most famous examples of community are the Boston Red Sox and the Chicago Cubs, each team having a loyal following who have some shared memories. Another way we can think of the community in sports is the way in which sports fans form groups to attend, to wait for, and to watch sporting events, not just because they like the competition and excitement that they offer but also to interact through “tailgating” and other activities. The community gives a sense of comfort, of

belonging and of sharing in something wonderful, which explains in part why sports are so appealing to many.

Although we can correlate Albanese's four C's with sport, we cannot simply conclude that sport is a type of religion. Sport often seems to have aspects comparable to religious ones, but there are limits to the analogy. However, the analogy is a strong one as is evident in the writing of the sport sociologist Harry Edwards who identified features that sport shares with religion. From his perspective, *sport has saints*, those people who were ambassadors of the sporting ideal throughout their lives. Examples that come to mind are Knute Rockne, Lou Gehrig, Jim Thorpe and Jackie Robinson. Just as the religious saints exemplified godly behavior during their lives, the saints of baseball modeled ideal behavior, particularly on the field of play. Along these same lines, Edwards states that *sport has gods*, figures who are one step higher than saints. These are those few who have been blessed with superstar status, such as Michael Jordan, Barry Bonds, and Barry Sanders. Their excellence was such that they are remembered and returned to for inspiration reminiscent of how we turn to God for strength.

We also should note that some athletes may seem to be on the road to sainthood but suffer a lapse and be guilty of sinning. For example, baseball players such as Mark McGwire and Rafael Palmeiro have recently been involved in steroid scandals causing people to doubt the legitimacy of their impressive statistics. This is also sometimes seen in the case of religious leaders such as Pat Robertson who advocated the assassination of President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela. Often the sins committed by evangelists or sports figures provide the opportunity for redemption, a belief central to Christianity. One example of this is Warren Moon, an NFL Hall of Fame candidate as a former quarterback

for the Houston Oilers and the Minnesota Vikings, who was charged with wife abuse. He expressed remorse for his actions and has been a model citizen and presumably a model husband since this incident.

“Ruling patriarchs” is another category found in the Bible that Edwards finds in sports. Included are the most successful coaches, managers, and commissioners, such as John Wooden and Joe Paterno. These elderly people, whose sports wisdom is widely acknowledged, are on the path to becoming saints upon their death. Also relevant is the presence of sport *shrines* where the most sacred artifacts (helmets, balls, etc., from exceptional sports moments) are kept. The various Hall of Fame locations are often destinations for those whom Edwards refers to as *“seekers of the kingdom,”* or sports fanatics. These shrines are sacred places, honoring the heroes of the games, celebrating great events of the past and overall glorifying the history of the sport. A final comparison that Edwards explores is that of *symbols of the faith*. Traditional religious symbols include the Cross, the Star of David or the Mezuzah. There are parallels in sport, such as Super Bowl rings and Olympic medals² but for us more ordinary examples would be team jerseys and caps worn by the faithful at games.

Edwards concludes that “sport is essentially a secular, quasi-religious institution. It does not, however, constitute an alternative to or substitute for formal sacred religious involvement.”³ He is distinguishing between two types of religion, one being the type of religion that is preached in churches, such as Protestant ones in the United States, and the other being a type of civil religion.⁴ Civil religion is said to reflect a way of life with

² Ibid., p. 57-60

³ Ibid., p. 61

⁴ Michael Novak, *The Joy of Sports* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1976), xi.

which there is a heavy emotional involvement. Sports are a deep concern for many to the extent that sport becomes a “secular, quasi-religious institution” for them.

We believe that additional parallels can be drawn between religion and sports. Restoration theology - the hope that the God of Israel would restore Israel to an earlier status as God’s people - can also be applied to the sports world. Pertaining to the sports world, fans are driven to follow their teams through the ugliest, most unsuccessful of times. The fans of the Red Sox, known as the Red Sox nation, were regularly reminded of the fall from greatness of their team after the trading of Babe Ruth to the Yankees. However, the Red Sox have consistently been ranked in the top ten in Major League Baseball attendance year after year. Their faith, their hope, was rewarded in seemingly miraculous fashion when the 2004 Boston Red Sox won the World Series after an 86-year drought.

The notion of a quest, of a religious journey or pilgrimage, is also part of sports. A key sporting event that illustrates how sport maintains religious elements is the NCAA basketball tournament, a tournament that has been referred to as a “quest for the holy grail.” CBS titles its tournament coverage “Road to the Final Four.” Both terms *quest* and *road* indicate the “religious fervor” associated with the tournament.⁵ Teams are on a journey to achieve the supreme goal, a championship. An analogy could be the journey that commenced with Moses traveling to and up the mountain of Sinai to acquire the Ten Commandments from God. He experienced adversity on his quest, as he was persecuted by the Pharaoh. Moses prevailed over the Pharaoh, which was a surprise, given that he was a man of small stature and had a speech impediment. In essence, he was the

⁵ Joseph L. Price, *From Season to Season: Sports as American Religion* (Macon, Geor.: Mercer University Press, 2001), 171-181

underdog. How does this apply to the NCAA tournament? Part of what makes the tournament exceptional is that any team can defeat any other team. Every year, “Cinderella stories” dominate talk of the tournament, and underdogs find themselves winning games.

Other comparisons can be made. Rather than large tombs for important religious figures, sports do such things as retire the numbers of retired stars. Just as the tombstones are supposed to be forever reminders of the person, the retired numbers are meant to pay tribute indefinitely to the heroes of the game. Also, just as the faithful pay for the construction of mega churches, sports fans in major communities are expected to contribute to the building of an enormous stadium, which in professional football reminds us of a church as the “congregation” assembles early on Sundays for the game.

Finally, music, particularly songs and chants, will forever be associated with religion and specifically with intensely spiritual services. Music and chanting are also very much a part of sports. Anthems such as “Take Me Out to the Ballgame” or the Monday Night Football theme song, “Are You Ready for Some Football?” are very familiar to sports fans. Those attending church at least on a minimal basis are familiar with songs such as “Go Tell it on the Mountain” or the Christmas hymn “Joy to the World.” Going to a baseball game without organ music to stimulate the crowd at key moments would seem odd. Attending many churches without an organ would draw the same reaction. The standard chants or repetitions such as “And God be with you” and “O Lord, hear our prayer” are reminiscent of the chanting of tens of thousands at a Barcelona soccer game as they repeat over and over, “Barza, Barza,” the nickname of their team.

However, unlike the Christian faith, sport does not provide a central figure, God, who forgives us, loves us, and helps us to understand our existence and to comprehend the meaning of it. In this sense, sports may replicate some of the intensity, some of the devotion of religious experience, but there seems no way for sports to offer the sustained comfort and direction that comes from leading a God-centered life in the community. The weekly coming together for a football game may seem to parallel the coming together for a Christian church service, but the two experiences remain fundamentally different. The sports event does provide for high points as does a church service but one's team can lose at a sports event, leading to frustration and possibly despair. That is not the case at a meaningful Christian service where we are uplifted and drawn closer to God. Also, the church service can give us insights, understanding, and hope that infuses our everyday life, something that is unlikely from a sporting event. Moreover, God is found in sacred texts, something lacking in sports. Our knowledge of God or Allah is based in part on the Bible, the Koran, and other documents. Sports have rulebooks and histories but nothing so critically important as what is conveyed about God's will and nature in sacred writings.

Perhaps all the comparisons that we have been able to draw between sport and religion are indicative of a dangerous temptation that comes with sports, the temptation to substitute a sporting experience, either passive or active, for a religious experience. The sense of comradeship, the intense focus, and the momentary highs may lead some to center their lives on sports and never develop a sense of God, and more importantly, a sense of God working in their lives.

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