

Editorial: Religion and Sport, Past, Present and Future

Religion and Sport is an emerging theme. A recent systematic literature review (Jarvie and Thornton 2012; Watson and Parker 2014) has identified that while there is an ever-increasing literature base, there is a serious lack of empirical research in the field of sport and religion. Research, scholarly meetings, journals and practical initiatives that focus on sport and religion have exponentially increased during the last decade. However, these discourses are limited to contexts of a particular country and of a particular discipline. The vast majority of research on sport–religion has come from the USA and focused on a narrow evangelical manifestation of Christianity. There is little, except for Catholic reflection on sport from the Vatican, from mainland Europe and on non-Western understandings of religion and sports. Most of the contributions published in the USA or the UK, for instance, do not take into account developments on the European continent or in Canada, not to mention Africa, Latin America and Asia. And yet important sporting events are characterised by their international dimension.

Religion and Sport is thus a fascinating theme for research in the history of international intercultural interactions. Concepts of health and well-being, peace, reconciliation and development are central in both humanities and social-science sports literature, although they are yet to be synthesised. These issues have received scant attention with regard to sport participation, though sport participation is increasingly on the political agenda of most European governments in light of the obesity pandemic. The themes of sport and sustainable development, gender, women and religion have also received scant attention.

Studies in World Christianity 21.3 (2015): 193–200

DOI: 10.3366/swc.2015.0123

© Edinburgh University Press

www.euppublishing.com/journal/swc

The interplay of sports, leisure, religion and spirituality proves for manifold areas to be of academic and practical interest. The interconnectedness of sports and religion can be partly discerned through the use of sport by religion and the use of religion by sport (Coakley 2003: 526–63). Sport, spirituality and religion are universal phenomena with significant social, cultural, economic, political, aesthetic dimensions. While they are peculiar domains in some respects, organised sports and religion evince affinities when considering vocabularies of faith, belief, devotion, ritual, power, institution, dedication, sacrifice, commitment, spirit, prayer, suffering, festivals and celebrations. Sport and religious rituals establish a sense of order and disorder, create cultural bridges and walls, generate systems of sacred symbols that endow the world with meaning and value. Sport, religion, spiritualities, well-being are products and commodities, big industries where large amounts of capital are created and concentrated.

Religion and sports have become major sources of power, identity, entertainment and community-building institutions. Sports also have ‘saints’ and ‘devils’, fans/adherents, hierarchies of power/leaders, scribes, symbols of faith, shrines and altars, winners and losers. Sports and sporting events can be interpreted as religious performances and religious events. Sports have many of the same effects on spectators that religion does. They have the ability to captivate many, create allegiances and anxieties that go far deeper than the movie industry. Each of these is characterised by virtualised performances and by the ecstatic devotion of its followers, whether in a sports arena or in a ritual space.

Sport and sporting events can be interpreted as religious/spiritual performances and well-being. In recent times, sport and sporting events have assumed tremendous significance comparable to religion/spirituality. As a cultural phenomenon, sport is a mirror of society, just as complex and contradictory. But it can also have negative side-effects such as violence, corruption, discrimination, hooliganism, nationalism, doping and fraud. Sports, leisure, religion and spirituality are integral to modes of social (dis)organisation, as cultural institutions with a local/global reach and import.

For instance, a fairly recent film, *Africa United* (directed by Debs Gardner-Paterson), a road-movie about a motley group of youngsters (three Rwandan kids) who embarked on an epic journey (travelling 3,000 miles) across seven African countries to attend the 2010 Soccer World Cup in South Africa, now screened in local cinemas across the globe, perhaps best eulogises through ‘a road trip through the

heart of Africa' the significant place and symbolic role of sports in Africa. In recent times, sports and sporting events have assumed tremendous significance only comparable to religion or spirituality. There is an urgency therefore to foster interdisciplinary research on the interface between sports, leisure, religion and spirituality. Such research will illuminate the role and implications of sports, leisure, religion and spirituality in social formation in collective local, national, transnational, transglobal contexts and explore how sports might operate in the service of a religious community and vice versa.

New multidisciplinary research initiatives could begin to interrogate and explore wide-ranging questions such as how sport, from physical activity to organised and competitive sport, can be a potentially powerful and cost-effective way of supporting a range of development, health, well-being and peace objectives and ask how awareness can be raised of the crucial need to integrate sport and physical activity into policies and programmes across a range of sectors, including health, education, economic and social development. Such a focus should highlight the potential of sport as a viable and practical tool for the realisation of sustainable development, health, well-being, peace and transformation, but also how sport programmes implemented in an equity-driven and culturally relevant way could give opportunity to women, persons with disabilities and young people to exhibit their core skills and values. Moreover, research interest could focus on the relationship between sport, religion and spirituality as an aspect of well-being but in a much more complex and varied way than that of muscular Christianity.

The right of access to and participation in sport and play has long been recognised in a number of international conventions. In 1978, UNESCO described sport and physical education as a 'fundamental right for all'. But until today, the right to play and sport has too often been ignored or disrespected. Sport has a unique power to attract, mobilise and inspire. By its very nature, sport is about participation. It is about inclusion and citizenship. It stands for human values such as respect for the opponent, acceptance of binding rules, teamwork and fairness, all of which are principles which are also contained in the Charter of the United Nations. The UN system draws on the unique convening power of sport as a cross-cutting tool for fundraising, advocacy, mobilisation, raising public awareness and leveraging the potential of sports events as outreach platforms. The mobilising power of sport is often used as a 'door opener' to convey crucial messages about HIV/AIDS, children's rights, the environment, education.

In grass-roots projects, sport is used in an extremely wide range of situations – whether as an integrated tool in short-term emergency humanitarian aid activities or in long-term development co-operation projects, on a local, regional or global scale. Sport plays a significant role as a promoter of social integration and economic development in different geographical, cultural and political contexts. Sport is a powerful tool to strengthen social ties and networks and to promote ideals of peace, fraternity, solidarity, non-violence, tolerance and justice. According to the Sport for Development and Peace International Working Group, sport is seen to have the most benefits in individual development, health promotion and disease prevention, promotion of gender equality, social integration and the development of social capital, peace-building and conflict prevention/resolution, post-disaster/trauma relief and normalisation of life, economic development, communication and social mobilisation. Sport is used to reach out to those most in need including refugees; child soldiers and victims of conflict and natural catastrophes; the impoverished; persons with disabilities; victims of racism, stigmatisation and discrimination; those living with HIV/AIDS, malaria and the like.

A wide range of stakeholders, including academia, local and national governments, international agencies and organisations, non-governmental organisations and the media, are increasingly interested in the potential of sport as a tool to reach personal, community, national and international development objectives such as the United Nations Millennium Development Goals. The eighth MDG calls for concerted action to cultivate ‘a global partnership for development’. An essential step towards realising the UN objectives is for the academic world, civil society, governments and international agencies to be fully engaged. Sport possesses unique value that enables it to contribute to development and peace processes. These attributes include its universal popularity; its capacity as a powerful global communications platform; its ability to connect; its cross-cutting nature; and its potential to empower, motivate and inspire.

Sport has been recognised globally as a powerful apparatus for building a strong, virile civil society and states. The use of sport-related activities is integral to international diplomacy, nation-building and fostering goodwill within local communities. Sport can serve as a ‘conflict-transforming tool’ as well as a ‘conflict-prevention measure’. Sport and physical activity are essential for improving health and well-being. Appropriate forms of sport and physical activity can play a significant role

in preventing as well as helping cure many of the world's leading non-communicable diseases. Regular participation in physical activity programmes can offer a wide range of physical, social and mental health benefits.

Consequently, physical activity can be an effective method of disease prevention for the individual and for societal well-being. It can also be a cost-effective way for nations to improve public health. Sport provides additional benefits to vulnerable groups – the young, women, older people. While sport can be a vehicle to help mitigate the spread and impact of HIV/AIDS, it is not a cure-all for development problems. To enable sport to unleash its full positive potential, emphasis must be placed on the effective monitoring and guiding of sports activities. Sport should be positioned as a highly effective tool in a broader toolkit of development practices, and should be applied in a holistic and integrated manner with other interventions and programmes to achieve optimal results. The positive potential of sport requires a professional and socially responsible intervention which is tailored to the respective social and cultural context.

On 27 March 2013 I convened an interdisciplinary workshop/seminar on the theme Religion and Sport: Past, Present and Future at the University of Edinburgh to interrogate some of the salient questions highlighted above. The seminar sought to address the exponential growth of research that examines the relationship between sport and religion, with a specific but not exclusive focus on sports and Christianity. The historical development of this literature was outlined through the identification and analysis of (i) key scholars who have contributed to the field since the late 1960s, (ii) key conceptual and empirical themes that have evolved, (iii) the links between research and practice – for example, the work of chaplains and church ministers in sporting locales – and (iv) emerging research areas, such as the theology of disability sport and the sport–religion interface in non-Western contexts, such as Asia and Africa. The robust intellectual exchange at the workshop gave birth to three of the four essays in this Special Issue. At the same time, it opened new vistas for further conversation crystallising in a forthcoming book: Adogame, Watson and Parker (eds), *Global Perspectives on Sports and Christianity*, to be published by Routledge in 2016. This edited collection is aimed at providing an interdisciplinary examination of the relationship between sports and Christianity from a 'global' perspective, which clearly differentiates it from past social-science work. It will, we hope, be launched at our proposed Inaugural Global Congress on Sports and

Christianity, to be held at York St John University, UK, on 24 to 28 August 2016.

In this Special Issue, four experienced, versatile scholars take the discourse on religion and sport to another interesting level. Frieder Ludwig blazes the trail by exploring the several correlations between football and culture and religion, interaction processes that are also of interest for religious studies and mission theology. He provides a brief historical background to the varieties of interaction; highlights some aspects of this complex interaction in different contexts within Africa, Latin America and Europe; and then offers some theological reflections. Tracing the evolution of the game of football in Europe, Ludwig demonstrates how theologians played an important role, citing Thomas Arnold in England and Dr Conrad Koch in Germany as some of its arrowheads and earliest protagonists. The nexus between mission and football is richly discussed. Mission societies were interested in the game of football against the backdrop of an assumption that it contributed to the strengthening of will-power and to self-discipline. A goal of their educational enterprise was to change consciousness and to introduce and control new concepts of time and space. As Ludwig aptly notes, 'Football and other sports helped missionaries and colonialists to transport their concepts of civilisation and to suppress indigenous, traditional sports in which traditional religions had played a role.' Football played a significant role in mission, although the influence of mission schools on football was short-lived. In many Latin American countries, the emergence of football was linked to the increasing British presence in the late nineteenth century. Soon football became attractive to Latin Americans, and the game was 'indigenised'. Football could also develop into a personality cult or a 'secular religion', as exemplified by the *Iglesia Maradoniana* (Church of Maradona). The essay also underscores how football in all three contexts, Africa, Latin America and Europe, has a political dimension and was used and misused for nationalistic ideologies. Football brought about cultural patterns and social identities which worked their way deeply into memorial culture.

Andrew Parker and Nick Watson, two veterans in the discourse on sport and theology, remark how sporting celebrities are rarely discussed within the broader realms of theological debate. Rarely has celebrity been discussed in relation to the sport—media—religion nexus. They point to the way in which academic discourse that centres on the lives and lifestyles of celebrity sports stars can provide fruitful ground for critiquing the role of sport in modern-day society. They contend that

analyses of the autobiographical details of contemporary sporting figures represent key sites through which cultural influence can be examined. Using the case study of a contemporary sporting icon, American Football (NFL) star Tim Tebow, they assess his popular cultural image in terms of its contribution to debates surrounding identity, Christianity and morality. They contend that whilst Tebow's popular cultural image affords all the hallmarks of modern-day 'platform ministry', his articulation of particular norms and values raises questions about the kinds of moral responsibilities high-profile Christian athletes have in relation to their expressions of faith. Drawing upon the historiography and sociological analyses of celebrity, Parker and Watson argue that celebrity status is situated at the heart of an individualised and ideologically grounded late capitalist culture in which visual media are central to the production of social identities. The essay also seeks to uncover ways in which celebrity status and 'stardom' might be viewed as powerful signifiers in terms of popular cultural perceptions of sports performers.

Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu grapples with the central question in what ways traditional world-views of supernatural causality have influenced the nature and practice of the faith in Ghana sports against the backdrop of the rapid growth of Christianity in Africa. The essay examines how, within the context of Ghana, athletes seek religious help from religious functionaries to beat the competition and secure a place in the national team and win tournaments. He remarks, 'Whatever it is, religion is never far away from African life and existence, and it plays an important role in Ghana sports.' In this vein, Asamoah-Gyadu explores the innovative ways in which contemporary Pentecostal/charismatic churches have reinvented alternative religious spaces for those whose faith prohibits the resort to 'diabolical' medicines obtained from traditional religious sources and Muslim clerics. He contends that the attention that indigenous African Christianity in particular gives to practical needs enables that platform to serve as an alternative religious circuit to which people go for interventions when they need answers to existential needs. According to him, the enduring ethos that sees causes behind events and that is now available in Pentecostal/charismatic spirituality is not much different from that which inspired AICs to supply holy water, oils, holy cloths and strings and other such substances to clients. They served similar purposes to the medicines of traditional religion and charms and amulets obtained from Muslim clerics. Thus he concludes that the developments in African sports concerning the use of medicines and consultation with shrine

priests, pastors and prophets betray a world-view that is heavily indebted to the African world-view of causalities.

Finally, Nick Watson and Andrew Parker unpack the legitimacy of claims that athletes in extreme sports may encounter the mystical and sublime, when examined through a Christian theological lens. While endorsing mountaineering, surfing and snowboarding as sport, they provide a useful critique as to whether extreme sport experience provides access to the mystical realms of the Holy. Drawing on the works of theologians, religious studies scholars and social scientists on the topic of the mystical and sublime in sporting experience, they explore two major themes: first, the differences and similarities between positive psychological states commonly reported in extreme sport and theistic, mystical experiences within the Christian tradition, and, secondly, the possibility of experiencing the sublime through the nature–person interaction in wilderness settings. They contend, rather provocatively, that within a balanced theology of leisure, such sports can be seen as forms of deep play, an avenue to well-being and growth, even spiritual expression in an aesthetic, creative sense that provides opportunities for meaningful, therapeutic and exhilarating wilderness activities.

Edinburgh/Princeton, September 2015

REFERENCES

- Coakley, Jay. 2003. *Sport in Society: Issues and Controversies*, 8th edn. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Jarvie, Grant, and James Thornton. 2012. *Sport, Culture and Society: An Introduction*, 2nd edn. London: Routledge.
- Watson, Nick J., and Andrew Parker. 2014. *Sport and the Christian Religion: A Systematic Review of Literature*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Copyright of Studies in World Christianity is the property of Edinburgh University Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.