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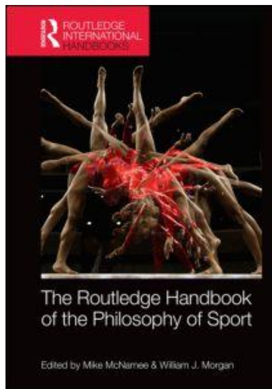

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16

RELIGION, THEOLOGY AND SPORT

Gregg Twietmeyer

Introduction

The association between sport and religion is by most accounts an ancient one. The intermingling of sport and its precursors with religion can be found in numerous ancient cultures all around the globe. From the ancient Olympics, to the Meso-American ball games, to the fertility and initiation rituals of North American Indians (Guttmann, 2004), a plenitude of sport's religious associations are identifiable in the ancient world.

Modern sport is different in so far as it is widely regarded as a secular rather than religious phenomenon. Sport historian Allen Guttmann (1978) first argued that modern sport was inherently secular in his book, *From Ritual to Record*. His thesis is now so widely accepted that the notion that modernity "invariably strips" sport of its "religious associations" is simply assumed as fact. (Guttmann, 2004, p. 11). Guttman's point was neither to celebrate nor lament that fact, but merely to chronicle this change as one of several significant differences between ancient and modern sport. On the surface, the truth of this claim seems self-evident. Yet upon further analysis some weaknesses in the thesis become apparent.

Unfortunately, Guttmann's paradigm has been so successful that it has buttressed the view held by many in the academy that the connection between sport and religion is an interesting anachronism. Debate over the veracity of Guttmann's thesis has been essentially non-existent. As a result, the problems and opportunities related to the interplay of sport and religion are missed largely because religious ideas themselves are not seen as *intellectually* respectable in the academy. Even when they are respected, religious ideas are quarantined from public view or relegated to narrow academic specialization. The view that religious ideas and religious questions are the product of living traditions that address perennial human questions, including those faced in sport, has lost currency. Religion may have been important in the past. It may have historical import, but enlightened adults, so the thinking goes, simply know better.[1]

A sound philosophical reflection on sport and religion reveals several problematic elements in the conventional secular accounts. The weaknesses of secularization theory – the claim that modernity is *necessarily* secularizing – have too often been ignored. The plausibility of these secularist narratives relies to a large extent on cultural myopia, where a focus on the contemporary geopolitical configuration called loosely "the West" is taken for granted. Furthermore, this criticism of secularization theory can be applied specifically to sport.[2] The secularist

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narrative is open to two major criticisms. First, there is significant *historical evidence* that sport and religion continue to intermingle. Our experience of modernity – at least if we *look closely* – is replete with examples of the interplay of sport and religion. Secondly, and more importantly, there are significant *philosophical problems* with secularization theory.

What are these philosophical problems and how do they illuminate the topic of this chapter on sport and religion? In short, the philosophical problems revolve around the definition of "sport" and in particular the definition of "religion". For the label "sport and religion" assumes an understanding of each term, each of which, upon reflection, may not be justified. If unjustified then the conceptual structure upon which the demarcations of "sport" and "religion" stand may end up bringing confusion rather than clarity. In other words, the conceptual framework, upon which this essay rests as an essay about "sport" and "religion", may itself be flawed.

In turn, the examination and clarification of these problems should open the door to some opportunities. For insofar as secularization theory's grip on the modern academy weakens, scholars should become more amenable to seriously considering the place of religious and theological insights in sport philosophy. At the very least, problematizing the dominant secularizing narrative, should open scholars up to a reexamination of their assumptions regarding the meaning, place, sufficiency, timeliness and import of "sport and religion" in contemporary sport philosophy. Christian theological resources, for example, can help sport philosophers to better understand several key issues in the discipline including – but not limited to – our understanding of play and our understanding of human embodiment.

This chapter comprises three parts. First, I examine some of the key authors and positions in the philosophic and historical literature related to sport and religion. This sets up a foundation upon which to consider the second major goal of the chapter; to challenge two assumptions in the modern academy: the truth of secularization theory and the reality of the genus "religion," of which Christianity is said to be one of several species. Finally, the chapter ends with some personal speculations on how Christian theology could help sport philosophers understand play and embodiment.

I Sport and religion: The extant literature

The literature on sport and religion is voluminous. For the sake of clarity and brevity, therefore, I review here some of the important sources from the following basic categories; historical accounts of sport and religion, important theological texts devoted to sport, and finally important texts within philosophy at large. I briefly consider some of the relevant work done within the sub-discipline of sport theology at the beginning of section III, on sport, religion, and embodiment.

It should be apparent that my read of the "sport–religion" canon – like all others – is necessarily incomplete, contestable and idiosyncratic. Hence, the point of this literature review is to give readers several key jumping off points from which to further consider the topic.

Sport history

Stephen Miller's (2004) *Ancient Greek Athletics* is an excellent examination of the birth growth and enduring cultural import of Greek sport in the ancient world. Particularly noteworthy for sport and religion is Miller's careful examination of the cultic and sacral origins of Ancient Greek sport, including not only at Olympia, but at the Pythian, Nemean and Isthmian Games as well. Miller's dismissal of the trope that Christianity killed ancient sport because Christianity was anti-athletic or anti-body is also noteworthy. As Miller notes, the Christian-backed

banning of the Games was predicated on the fact that Greek "athletics had always been tied to religion; every game was sacred to some god or goddess in the old Greek pantheon" (p. 6). It was paganism, not athletics, to which the ancient Christians objected. One other noteworthy work regarding the intersection of ancient sport and religion is Don Kyle's (1998) *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome*, which has chapters on Christian persecutions in ancient Rome, as well as fascinating discussion of the interplay of religious, ritualistic, and ideological forces in shaping the Roman understanding of death in the athletic arena.

Regarding comprehensive general histories and modern histories, there are several works worth noting. Two highly regarded general histories spend considerable time on the religious aspects of sport, Guttmann's (2004) *Sport: The First Five Millennia* and William J. Baker's (1982) *Sports in the Western World*. Baker (2007) also wrote *Playing with God*, a history of modern sport and religion, a generally solid text, which occasionally descends into over-simplification and statements regarding religion so sweeping as to border on caricature.[3] Others worth noting are Robert J. Higgs (1995) *God in the Stadium*, an examination of the integration of sport and religion, and Shirl Hoffman's (2010) *Good Game*, which again cautions against too close of a relationship between sport and Christianity. Both texts, although well written, deserve further critical treatment and analysis.

One of the most important things that sport history does for the sport philosopher, especially with regard to its ties to religion, is to complicate and broaden the conceptual schemata upon which philosophical reflection proceeds. An excellent example of what I mean can be found in Nancy Struna's (1996) *People of Prowess*, in which she recounts the myriad influences involved in the cultural transition from traditional to early modern conceptions and practices of sport, leisure and labor. Put briefly, Struna shows two important things. First, patterns of sport, leisure and labor have changed. Our conceptions and practices are historical, that is, temporally bound, and organically evolving. This is a key point, as will be seen, when we consider the concept "religion". Second, this shift from Catholic to Puritan conceptions of sport was not just a religious one, but rather involved a dynamic mix of forces. Theology, geography, class, and technology (such as clocks) all played a role in reshaping modern conceptions of work and leisure. For example, the Puritan commitment to work – at least in the New World – resulted from "both theology and their economic interests", for the "demands and rewards of work itself were greater in the New World" (p. 61). The point is simple. Theology was not the sole influence and the Puritan position, even if excessive, had an internal logic. Idleness in the New World could get you killed.[4]

Similarly, the Puritans were not anti-sport in the way they are so often caricatured. In fact, they endorsed "lawful practices," including "athletic contests, archery, and hunting, fishing, and fowling" (pp. 62–3). In turn, they condemned gaming (gambling) and animal baiting. Each of which remain today, to one degree or another, associated with vice. Again, the clear logic of the Puritan position, even if problematic, comes into view.

Theology and spirituality

Theologians and theological texts are worth mentioning in the context of sport and religion primarily but not exclusively for the light they shed on conceptions of the human person and the nature and/or importance of embodiment. This is important simply for its intrinsic philosophic interest, but also because misunderstandings of religion are, as Stephen Prothero (2007) has shown, quite common. Just as Puritanism has been caricatured, so too has Christianity. For example, consider the following claim made in a recent sociology of sport textbook: "some church leaders felt that the body was inherently evil and should be subordinate to the spirit"

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(Woods, 2007, p. 257). To read, engage, and understand the great theological texts in the Christian tradition, not to mention the Bible itself, is to see that such a claim is misleading if not clearly mistaken.

The two most noteworthy theologians in the Western tradition are, of course, Augustine and Aquinas, both of whom were, to some degree, philosophers as well.[5] Augustine's works of note for sport philosophy include; the *Confessions* (1991), where he famously condemns the inhumanity of the Coliseum, *On Christian Teaching* (1997), where he points out that there are many senses – including nonliteral – of scripture, and *The City of God* (1958), where he states clearly that "it was not the corruptible flesh that made the soul sinful; on the contrary, it was the sinful soul that made the flesh corruptible" (p. 299).

One final speculation on Augustine should be made. In *On Christian Teaching*, he argues that the state of one's heart, not just the type of activity in which one is engaged, is what requires moral evaluation: "In all matters of this kind actions are made acceptable or unacceptable not by the particular things we make use of, but by our motives for using them and our methods of seeking them" (p. 78). The importance of this point for sport is two-fold. Augustine's insight reinforces the importance of virtue rather than mere legalism. Inherent evils exist, but so do culturally defined norms. They should not be confused. In such cases, what matters is not the "use made of things, but the user's desire" (p. 77). Furthermore, his point supports the need for the type of practical analysis necessary in any working model of broad internalism. For an examination of the "point and purposes that underlie the game" (Simon, 2010, p. 52), we must evaluate context and motives, rather than merely the prescriptions or prohibitions found in the rules. If an authority such as Augustine can be brought to the cause, even if only tangentially, so much the better for those who want to champion broad internalism as a *practical* philosophy.

Thomas Aquinas is of importance for a myriad reasons. In terms of his importance to sport and religion, he again, like Augustine, insists on the goodness of embodiment, and integrates Aristotle's holistic conception of the human person (known technically as hylemorphic dualism) into his account of religion. Aquinas argues for the integral nature of human embodiment consistently and vigorously in his monumental work the *Summa Theologica*, but it also shows up other places, perhaps most importantly in his *Commentary on First Corinthians* (Aquinas, n.d.) where he corrects a common Platonic mistake often attributed to Christianity: Salvation is not about "saving souls" in the sense of escaping the body but, rather, is about personal transformation through resurrection. This follows from his claim that body and soul are constitutive features of a single person:

> For it is clear that the soul is naturally united to the body and is departed from it, contrary to its nature and per accidens. Hence the soul devoid of its body is imperfect, as long as it is without the body … but the soul, since it is part of man's body, is not an entire man, and *my soul is not I.*
>
> *(Aquinas, n.d., p. 197 [emphasis added])*

Several non-Christian philosophers who also grappled with Aristotle and his hylemorphic conception of human nature are worth briefly mentioning including the Islamic thinkers Avicenna and Averroes, as well as the Jewish scholar Moses Maimonides. For solid introductions to these philosophers and how they fit into the Aristotelian tradition, see MacIntyre (2009) and Copleston (1993). Finally, Eastern Taoist thinking has also made important contributions and are considered in greater depth in section III of the chapter.

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Philosophy

Given the ubiquitous influence of philosophy on religion, I again only point to a handful of significant sources, some of which reappear in greater detail in later sections. Two philosophically inclined works of sociology are worth mentioning in this regard. First is Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1955), which argues that play is the root of culture. Man is not just a builder, nor a knower, but a player. Play, games, and sport are therefore worth serious attention. Second, is Peter Berger's (1969) *A Rumor of Angels*, in which he argues that play is itself an argument for the existence of a transcendent reality.

Leisure, The Basis of Culture by German Thomist Josef Pieper (1998) is another important text that makes religious claims about what leisure is and should be. Leisure is a stillness ultimately rooted in God. "Leisure is the disposition of receptive understanding, of contemplative beholding, and immersion – in the real" (p. 31). Leisure, rightly understood, is neither idle distraction, nor utilitarian efficiency. Our participation in sport has the potential to be both shallow and profound. If we are to experience such profundity, it will result from leisure, the "deepest root" of which "is worshipful celebration" (p. 55).

Finally, Michael Polayni's (1962) epistemology, found most comprehensively in *Personal Knowledge*, is important to sport and religion for two reasons. Polanyi's theory emphasizes the importance of skill, and the importance of fiduciary commitment. That is, all knowledge is built upon the foundation of personal skill and trust in authority. Polanyi's emphasis on skills relies on links between ritual, practice and apprenticeship, all of which can be found in both religious and sporting practices. Meanwhile, Polanyi's emphasis on fiduciary commitment makes room for a reconciliation of faith and reason by showing that belief not doubt is the ultimate source of knowledge. Sport philosophers have paid significant attention to Polanyi's focus on skills. See, for example, Peter Hopsicker's (2009) article in the *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*. Further attention is needed on the implications of Polanyi's claim that all knowledge is rooted in belief and trust.

II Understanding religion

The definition of "religion" has always been problematic. In fact, the nature, history and definition of religion has been contested *vigorously* for at least the "past 30 years" (Nongbri, 2013, p. 2). Yet, there has been little to no attention paid to these issues among sport philosophers. Nevertheless, any sound understanding of "sport and religion" needs to take these debates over the meaning of "religion" into account. This is especially important since doing so will likely lead many to acknowledge that "religion" is, just like "sport", a contentious and thoroughly modern concept. As Brent Nongbri (2013) argues, "what is modern about the ideas of 'religions' and 'being religious' is the isolation and naming of some things as 'religious' and others as 'not religious'" (p. 4). In the pre-modern world, one's obligations to the divine were in fact communal, and permeated all aspects of society. Secularity is a modern idea.

In antiquity, the Latin term *religio* did not mean anything akin to a separate sphere of life regarding the gods or the transcendent, nor did it mean the genus for the species of different understandings or systems related to the gods or the transcendent. In contrast to those modern assumptions regarding religion, *religio* meant something akin to "a powerful requirement [or obligation] to perform some action" (Cavanaugh, 2009, p. 62). In fact, the ancients were much more likely to see alternative systems of belief as heresies rather than "separate religions". John of Damascus, for instance, "set a lasting precedent" when he classified Muslims "not as members of a separate religion but as Christian heretics" (Nongbri, 2013, p. 66). Since the concept

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"religion" did not exist in the ancient world, this makes perfect sense. Theologian William Cavanaugh (2009) insists, "Ancient languages have no word that approximates what modern English speakers mean by religion" (p. 62). Given this fact, one might expect to find a dichotomy where religion has been problematic when applied to the ancient world, but fruitful when applied to the present. Yet again, things are not that simple. Even modern applications of the term religion are problematic.

As Cavanaugh (2009) points out, contemporary scholars have generally clung to either a substantive or functionalist definition of religion, neither of which are without problems. The "substantivist" view defines religion by the content or substance of its adherents' beliefs, while the functionalist defines religion by the import that a practice, institution or set of beliefs has in any given cultural context. For the substantivist, religion is about something – God, or the divine, or the transcendent – it deals with "ultimate reality." For a functionalist, religion is that to which we are most committed. It may be about God, but it may also be about the free market, Marxism, sports, or witchcraft. What matters is the sacral character of the devotion not the content of that devotion.

The substantivist view is often criticized for being either too narrow or too broad. It seems too narrow for instance, if one bases the substance of religion on "God". For this would seem to exclude things usually labeled as religions, such as Confucianism and at least some forms of Buddhism. To make sure that a substantivist definition is inclusive of more than monotheism, more generic language is often used. Yet, as one expands the substance of the belief to the divine or the transcendent, it becomes harder to exclude things not generally thought of as religions. It is hard, for instance, to argue that a shift to any sufficiently inclusive definition of a "transcendent" understanding of the substance of religion could exclude nationalism. "If transcendence can refer to any perceived reality that exceeds and unifies ordinary human experience of the material world, it is hard to imagine a better candidate for transcendence than the 'imagined community' of the nation" (Cavenaugh, 2009, pp. 103–4). Furthermore, the distinction between immanent and transcendent implicit in such thinking is itself problematic for many spiritual traditions.

These problems have led some scholars to reject the "substantivist" model in favor of a "functionalist" model. According to the functionalists, religion is not about content, but rather about commitment(s). That which holds our ultimate allegiance is our religion. It is from this point of view that some scholars have argued that "sport is the modern religion".

Arguments that sport is a religion are usually tempered by talk of the relation being analogical (Wann and Melnick, 2001, pp. 198–200). A similar qualification is the claim that sports are a "civil religion". Michael Novak (1994) explains the idea this way in his book *The Joy of Sports*, "Sports are religious in the sense that they are organized institutions, disciplines, and liturgies; and also in the sense that they teach religious qualities of heart and soul" (p. 21). From a functionalist point of view, sport, pleasure, money, power, Communism, or nationalism could all be – and often are – the object of religious devotion. This is because each can be seen as the object of our "ultimate concern" (Tillich, 1953). Yet, as Cavanaugh (2009) writes, "If nearly every ideological system or set of practices can be a religion, then calling something religious does not help distinguish it from anything else" (p. 106).

This brief discussion should point out the importance of examining the definition of religion for sport philosophy. For an article on the topic of "sport and religion" will take on very different meanings depending on the definition of religion assumed. In fact, if sport itself can – under a functionalist reading – be thought of as a religion, then the topic could be considered redundant at best or incoherent at worst.

In modern America, the concept "religion" is incongruent with pre-modern and non-Western spiritual practice. While we tend to think of religion as a matter of intellectual beliefs

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and private behavior, pre-modern "religion" – at least in terms of Christianity – was far more corporate, communal, and practical (ritualized).[6] Too often, the modern Western definition of religion starts with the assumptions of the Protestant Reformation. Scholars are apt then to try to shoehorn disparate practices from disparate cultures into a one-size-fits-all post-Reformation conception of religion. In practice, religion becomes "anything that sufficiently resembles modern Protestant Christianity" (Nongbri, 2013, p. 18). This is not to deny that Catholicism, or Buddhism, could fit into such a definitional structure, but rather to insist that the fit assumes a Protestant norm. As such, the structure itself in neither self-evident nor neutral.[7] Therefore, rather than search for an essence to religion, Cavanaugh argues that scholars should examine, "why certain things are called religion under certain conditions" (p. 119).

The fact that scholars (such as myself) struggle to discuss other spiritual traditions without using the word "religious" arises from the fact that our concepts and intellectual categories are culturally bound. Therefore they must be applied cautiously. That is not to say that there are no universals, but rather that sometimes we confuse a cultural construct for a universal. This point has purchase for sport philosophers trying to makes sense of the relations between sport and religion. First, our definition of religion is a choice not a trans-historical or trans-cultural reality. Our definition of religion is a choice, not in the sense of being an individual preference, but rather in the sense of requiring our personal loyalty and ideological commitment. All of us either implicitly or explicitly accept certain principles when we assent to any given definition of religion. "What counts as religion and what does not in any given context is contestable," insists Cavanaugh (2009), "and depends on who has the power and authority to define religion at any given time and place" (p. 59) Thus, the veracity of Guttmann's thesis – that modern sport is necessarily secularizing – may well hinge on the meaning of the vocabulary one uses. Or consider the fact that controversies over prayer in sport or "conspicuous piety" in sport (Feezell, 2013) hinge – to a large extent – on the assumption that sport is and should be a secular practice. Yet the sacred/secular dichotomy depends upon a vocabulary that only exists in the modern world. That is, modern sport is comparatively secular, because the sacred/secular dichotomy is itself *a product of modernity*. Furthermore, modern sport appears secular, as compared with ancient sport, because we only have the eyes to see things through the modern sacred/secular "religious" framework.

The quarantining of religious questions from academic discussion is not therefore inevitable, but instead relies on the maintenance of socially constructed dichotomies, such as religious/secular and public/private, that serve to maintain current liberal power structures. Even leaving aside whether such liberal structures are superior to other forms of political life – these distinctions may very well be warranted – the point remains that they are neither neutral, natural, nor inevitable. Thus, when sport philosophers acknowledge the volitional nature of the concept "religion", they promote more realistic appraisals of religion(s), they encourage intellectual tolerance, and they help scholars avoid the errors of anachronism.

If this is right it should be clear why the phrase "sport and religion" is itself problematic. For example, sport philosophers should avoid anachronistically imposing modern conceptions, ideas, and principles onto the past. The conception, for instance, that religion is a "private matter" while secular affairs are "public" is, independent of whether or not one finds it a good idea, a modern creation. As Talal Asad (2003) points out, "the supposedly universal opposition between 'sacred' and 'profane' finds no place in pre-modern writing" (pp. 31–2). Uncritically insisting on the application of our present conception of religion upon the past will only cloud our understanding of history.

Does all of this mean that scholars need to abandon the term "religion"? No, it is so deeply ingrained in our intellectual habits that trying to expunge it would likely cause as many

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problems as it would solve. However, it does mean that sport philosophers must broaden their field of vision when considering sport and religion. The bottom line is this: a close examination of the concept "religion" reveals that sport philosophers need to acknowledge that religion "is not simply found, but invented" (Cavenaugh, 2009, p. 58).

III Theology, play, embodiment

Sport and religion has received serious if sporadic attention in the philosophy of sport literature. The following developments are worth noting. The *International Journal of Religion and Sport* began publishing in 2009. Unfortunately, the journal has only published one more volume since then. Several anthologies of note have been published in recent years, including Parry, Nesti, and Watson's (2011) *Theology, Ethics and Transcendence in Sports* and Watson and Parker's (2013) *Sports and Christianity: Historical and contemporary perspectives*.

While there are myriad popular treatments of sport and religion, such as Phil Jackson's (1995) *Sacred Hoops*, systematic and academic book-length treatments of a sustained theological or religious argument as applied to sport philosophy are harder to find. Fortunately, this seems to be changing. Two books offering explicit theologies of sport have just been published: *The Games People Play: Theology, religion, and sport* by Robert Ellis (2014), and *A Brief Theology of Sport* by Lincoln Harvey (2014). Although it remains to be seen what enduring impact they will have, each is receiving praise from highly respected scholars in the field. Shirl Hoffmann, for example, says of Ellis (2014) that his book is "A must-read for anyone hoping to understand how sport fits within the Christian tradition" (back cover). Whatever the strengths or drawbacks of these texts, the trend towards an unapologetically theological approach to religion and sport rather than a merely anthropological, historical, or sociological approach, is a positive one.

I take the same theological approach when considering two ways that sport philosophy can benefit from examinations of sport and religion. As I consider the ways in which religion impacts sport and sport philosophy – in particular regarding play and the nature of the human person – I focus primarily on Christianity. This is for two reasons. First, given the conceptual difficulties of the general concept of religion here discussed, it is better to focus on specific spiritual traditions like Christianity. And, secondly, pragmatically, it is my own area of experience, belief and expertise. That said, I attempt to point out important insights or implications for sport found in other non-Christian spiritual traditions, for example – between play and the *Tao Te Ching*.

Sport, play, and God

Although the precise relationship between sport and play is a matter of contention, I follow Schmitz (1979) and claim that "sport is primarily an extension of play" (p. 22). As such, play must be taken into account in order to explore in what sense sport can be a religious phenomenon. I also think that Schmitz's further point that "Religion, art and play are rightly spoken of as ways of transcending the strictly natural world" (p. 25) provides yet another reason to see the connection between sport, religion, and play, in terms of play.[8] The following features of play seem apposite in this regard. The first concerns play's oft noted "uselessness". In a world so often driven by purposes, outcomes, and utility, play stands out for being superfluous. It is an autotelic practice in the sense that "the prize of play is play itself" (Meier, 1980, p. 25). The second aspect of play worth noting is its profundity. Although play has no instrumental purpose, or perhaps paradoxically because it has no such purpose, play seems to generate deep meaning. This experience has been described in various ways. Johan Huizinga (1955) says that

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"play casts a spell over us," (p. 10) while theologian Romano Guardini (1994), insists that play is "life pouring itself forth without an aim, seizing upon riches from its own abundant store, significant through the fact of its existence" (p. 111). For Guardini, it is the embrace of purposelessness (its lack of an external justification or end) that gives play its depth and meaning. For meaning is not realized in the endless chain of extrinsic justifications, but rather "significance consists in [things] being what they are." Play reminds us that the highest things *are*; they have no need for justification. Existence is not, in the end, about purposes but rather meaning.

Play's uselessness and its profundity point to three important insights regarding "sport and religion". First, as sociologist Peter Berger (1969) suggests in *A Rumor of Angels*, play is experientially suggestive of the supernatural. It is a "signal of transcendence". Second, following Guardini, play has important implications for our understanding of worship. Finally, a proper understanding of play suggests, that sport philosophers can assert with *confidence* that sport should be pursued *in the spirit of play*. That is, the religious implications of play, ground and deepen one's claims regarding the normative status of the play spirit. The play spirit is not just phenomenologically interesting, or existentially important, as "one authentic choice among many", but rather philosophers can say with confidence that *we ought* to approach sport in the spirit of play.

As Berger (1969) argues, there are in the modern world "signals of transcendence". In addition to play, our experiences of order, hope, damnation, and humor all point to the plausibility of the divine because each of these experiences suggest a purposeful reality transcending the chaotic and meaningless universe suggested by a materialistic understanding of reality.[9] These signs of transcendence are part of the common human inheritance and are therefore open to all. Berger's inclusion of play is built on Huizinga's insights regarding the separate time and space created by play. In play, we momentarily escape from the "'serious' time in which one is moving toward death".[10] In fact, Berger insists, "joy is play's intention" (p. 58).

Berger admits that although the experience of play admits of a religious interpretation it certainly does not demand it. Although the experience of play indicates strongly that we live in a meaningful world, the implications of that experience are open to interpretation. This admission of contingency may seem to weaken the power of the point, but in fact, it does not. For Berger only wants to allow for the credibility of the transcendent or religious interpretation of play experiences. Of course, for those that have, or believe that they have had a play experience that points towards a divine reality, the experience is profound. The point is not to require belief but to *allow for it*. Again, religion and sport are linked through play. These signs of transcendence, including play, are proof of the plausibility and seriousness (in principle) of spiritual and religious interpretations of life. They are by no means proof of the truth of any of those interpretations. The rich world of play "cries out" for explanation and religious explanations of that experience should be taken seriously.

Acknowledging this experiential dichotomy (between those who believe and those who doubt) does not preclude one from advancing certain interpretations as true. Each side can hold their ground. It simply means one will be aware that other interpretations, even if mistaken, can be made in good faith.[11] One intriguing religious interpretation that could be fruitfully applied to the experience of play as described by Berger is the Christian idea of *prolepsis*, which theologian Richard John Neuhaus (2009) defines as, "an act in which a hoped-for future is already present' (p. 14). In traditional Christian theology, for instance, both baptism and the Eucharist are understood as hints, or foretastes of the fullness of Christian life to come at the end of time. They are visible signs of God's grace at work in the world. Again, this type of experience is open to all, even if not all will interpret the experience the same way, even in non-religious contexts. As Neuhaus points out, most of us "have moments of encounter with the good, true,

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and beautiful in which we are moved to say 'Ah, it [heaven, the divine, truth itself] must be something like this'" (p. 228).

From this perspective, for those who understand their play experiences as a "signal of transcendence", play can point towards worship. For their play experience itself suggests a divine reality. That is, one's lived experience calls forth not only pleasure or joy or meaning, but also a profound sense of gratitude. Interestingly, at least if Guardini is correct, worship also points towards play. Guardini (1994) argues that worship suggests play because the liturgy is itself – at least when rightly conceived – a form of play and because play is hinted at in Scripture as an aspect of the Holy Trinity.

Suits' (1977) famous objection in *Words on Play* that worship or the contemplation of God can rarely be rightly understood as play does not hold up under scrutiny. He objects that: 1) All non-Utopian play must include the reallocation of resources; 2) Worship is not "purely autotelic" (p. 129), but instead usually involves some instrumental purpose. Both of these objections fail against Guardini's position. First, because, as Suits himself partially admits, time itself is an instrumental resource that must always be reallocated, and second because Guardini's (1994) conception of worship rightly understood is such that "In the liturgy, man is no longer concerned with himself; his gaze is directed towards God. In it man is not so much intended to edify himself as to contemplate God's majesty" (p. 110).

To defend this claim, Guardini draws a distinction between purpose and meaning. Purpose is about the subordination of "actions or objects to other actions or objects," (p. 106) while the meaning of an object – as mentioned previously – "consists in being what they are" (p. 107). Guardini then asks:

> Now what is the meaning of that which exists? That it would exist and should be the image of God the everlasting. And what is the meaning of that which is alive? That it should live, bring forth its essence, and *bloom* as a natural manifestation of the living God.
>
> *(Guardini, 1994, p. 107 [emphasis added])*

Worship is about *blooming* in this sense. The liturgy is meant with the "help of grace", to grow human beings "into living works of art before God, with no other aim or purpose than that of living and existing in his sight" (p. 113). The liturgy is therefore about meaning not purpose. Worship, Guardini insists, is about play: "To be at play, or to fashion a work of art in God's sight – not to create, but to exist – such is the essence of the liturgy" (p. 112). In commenting on Guardini, theologian Robert Barron (2011) sums up the idea this way, "We play football and we play musical instruments because it is simply delightful to do so, and we play in the presence of the Lord for the same reason" (p. 173).[12]

These arguments reflect and reinforce the importance of my final point on play – that sport philosophers can and should confidently proclaim that sport is meant to be pursued in the spirit of play. In other words, theological ideas such as Guardini's are an untapped resource. Play is important – that is humanly significant. The sacral aspect of play reinforces and emboldens the declaration of some key realities in the world of sport. This is no small matter.

The most obvious and perhaps the most ignored example in the world of competitive sports is the fact that victory is fleeting. The dour ethic of workman-like obligation oft found in sport, which is built on an endless and insatiable pursuit of victory is not only miserable, it does not endure. Even if we secure victory, trophies tarnish, calendars and seasons roll over, and championships are forgotten. In contrast, the play spirit opens up sport to a reemphasis on process and not mere product. It opens up sport to the admission of human frailty (Skillen, 1998).

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Although sport is non-trivial, and although the pursuit of victory is appropriate, the means of pursuit and the motivation for pursuing victory matter as much if not more than the end (victory). In pointing beyond itself, in prolepsis, a theological understanding of play reminds us of the vanity of placing our hopes in something as fleeting as victory. This is because the temporal points to the eternal. The experience is, from within the point of view of prolepsis, an intimation of beatitude; of being in the direct unmediated presence of God. As Saint Paul says, "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face" (1st Corinthians, 13:12, NRSV). Although winning and losing matter, they must be understood within the context of a larger understanding.

Consider for instance Stephen Mitchell's (Tzu, 1988) translation of the sixty-eighth chapter of the *Tao Te Ching*.

> The best athlete
> wants his opponent at his best.
> The best general
> enters the mind of his enemy.
> The best businessman
> serves the communal good.
> The best leader
> follows the will of the people.
> All of them embody
> the virtue of non-competition.
> Not that they don't love to compete,
> but they do it in the spirit of play (p. 68).[13]

The fact that play points beyond itself,[14] that it has a sacral aspect, allows for sport communities to emphasize and *defend* the non-instrumental aspects of the games. This sacral aspect can also help build the formal institutions necessary to protect the non-instrumental goods of play from competitive or commercial excesses, by creating and promoting a genuine concern for others. To the degree that this occurs, the play spirit can be said to foster human dignity (Twietmeyer, 2007). When play suggests that one's own life is actually meaningful, then by extension one see that all human lives are *actually* meaningful. It is not mere rhetoric but rather a profound and *experienced* truth. As such, a recognition of the sacral aspects of the play spirit creates a moral imperative in sport. In pointing beyond itself play demands personal responsibility. In short, play buttressed by its own anthropological and spiritual implications creates more room for the confident assertion of richer understandings of sport. To borrow from Guardini, it reminds us that sport is at its best when pursued for meaning rather than purpose(s).[15] Therefore, the *principle* of religious expression in sport should be received with a spirit of openness rather than suspicion, for it has the potential to be a strong force for good.

Sport, religion, embodiment

In this final section, I sketch the preliminary picture that I have been drawing of how certain religious insights can help sport philosophers address the perennial and perhaps preeminent issue in the field, that of the nature of the human person. As R. Scott Kretchmar (2005) argues, our conception "of human nature … is the foundation of everything we do" (p. 48). This is important for sport, physical education and kinesiology because our understanding of embodiment's role in human nature will deeply influence our conception of the import and

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possibilities of those institutions. For example, one might ask: to what extent is sport participation engaging the body or the person?

The most obvious example of how assumptions about human nature impact sport is the fact that a dualistic appraisal of education is unlikely to see "play, games and sport" as anything more than a tangential aspect of education (Kretchmar, 2005). Far too often, "play, games, and sport" have been devalued on the assumption that embodiment is a trivial or temporal aspect of human life. Furthermore, religion (Christianity in particular) has been advanced as the cause for the devaluing of embodiment in the West. Both claims are mistaken.

I want to speak, therefore, to some of the ways embodiment has been illuminated in Eastern spiritual thinking, as well as examine the Christian idea of the Incarnation and its implications. The overarching philosophical point of engaging both perspectives is this: religious traditions far from being uniformly suspicious of human corporeality can be and often are allies in the fight to defend the importance of human embodiment. If sport philosophers want to change the public's generally materialistic or dualistic conception of embodiment, they ignore these religious resources at their own peril.

In *Zen in the Art of Archery*, German philosopher Eugen Herrigel (1981) recounts his six years of travail in Japan attempting to master the art of archery. From a Zen perspective, Herrigel opines that archery is neither preparation for war, nor a sport, nor even really an art, but rather a spiritual exercise "whose aim consists in hitting a spiritual goal, so that fundamentally the marksman aims at himself, and may even succeed in hitting himself" (p. 4). This spiritual exercise is meant to develop (through the disciplines inherent in the practice) the ability to quiet the conscious self so that the embodied skills shine through unencumbered by calculation, worry or desire. The result is that the arrow can be said to shoot itself. The master's archery is "absolutely self-oblivious and without purpose" (p. 53). His shots fall "like a ripe fruit" (p. 53) falls from a tree.

When, after hours of practice and dedication, this "non-action" occurs, it is, says Herrigel, a tantalizing experience:

> But inwardly, for the archer himself, right shots have the effect of making him feel that the day has just begun. He feels in the mood for all right doing, and, what is perhaps even more important, for all right not doing. Delectable indeed is this state. But he who has it, said the Master with a subtle smile, would do well to have it as though he did not have it.
>
> *(Herrigel, 1981, p. 53)*

It is for this reason that ritual and repetition are so important. The skills are neither merely technical nor theoretical but living traditions born of apprenticeship. They are taught as part of a formal apprenticeship, which, in all likelihood, spans generations. Spiritual growth comes from right practice and is born from tradition. Although one lives in the moment, through the skill, this experience rests upon a historical foundation. This historical foundation is both personal and cultural. Zen spiritual insight is born of the embodied experience of archery, an embodied experience that relies on an interpersonal transmission of the central skills, habits, and dispositions of the practice.[16] The corporeal – in this instance at least – is anything but incidental to the spiritual life.

Yet Zen Buddhism is not the only religion that acknowledges the critical importance of embodiment. Christianity, as already noted, is not anti-body. Countless examples can be shown to demonstrate the point. Whether one consults the biblical texts, the great historical theologians such as Augustine or Aquinas, or simply considers the basic theological suppositions of the faith (such as creation, Incarnation, resurrection), it is clear that Christianity is a religion

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intensely interested in defending the goodness of human embodiment. In fact, this can be so clearly demonstrated that one can say with confidence that, "Although some Christians might claim that the human body is evil, it is an *un-Christian* belief" (Twietmeyer, 2008, p. 459).

To justify this claim, consider two sources, one historical, the other contemporary. The historical source is the great Protestant reformer Martin Luther, while the contemporary source comes from the work of the Lutheran turned Catholic theologian Adam Cooper. Luther argues forcefully in *On the Councils and the Church*, that Jesus is "true God and true man". That is, he was, in his human life, just as bound up in earthly realities as any other human person. With great poignancy, Luther then reminds his readers what this means:

> God did not derive his divinity from Mary; but it does not follow that it is therefore wrong to say that God was born of Mary, that God is Mary's Son, and that Mary is God's mother … She is the true mother of God and bearer of God … Mary suckled God, rocked God to sleep, prepared broth and soup for God, etc. For God and man are one person, one Christ, one Son, one Jesus.
>
> *(Luther, 1967, pp. 291–2)*

Luther's point is to reaffirm what was posited earlier, that Christianity is about a person not an idea.[17] God has become man. In the Incarnation, the spiritual invades the material world.[18]

More recently, Adam Cooper (2007, 2008) masterfully reviews the understanding of corporeality in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament), the New Testament, as well as in several key figures from the Christian intellectual tradition. In examining these understandings of corporeality, he convincingly demonstrates the intelligibility of a "theological anthropology," an anthropology that sees the "human body as a kind of external, dynamic definition of both the human being and the visible image of God" (Cooper, 2008, p. 5). Cooper insists that "Perfected humanity, deified humanity, is always bodily humanity" (ibid.). Cooper beautifully points out the full implications of this insight:

> The Christian God is a God for whom immaterial or artificial representation will not do … A properly theological approach to the body involves asking what the body and the flesh mean, not first in their relation to mind or soul but above all in their most fundamental relation – which is to God. It is the conviction of the Christian tradition that the meaning of corporeality is an integral aspect of the meaning of the human person, a creature that bears in itself an inherent, irreducible relation to its creator.
>
> *(Cooper, 2007, p. 31)*

It does not take a great cognitive leap to see that this work could be adapted to or even in some cases directly applied to sport. Creation, the Incarnation and resurrection show that Christianity "is a religion deeply interested in the human body, since each body is a person, and each person a creature and image-bearer of God. In the three great mysteries of God's dealings with the universe – creation, incarnation, and resurrection – all material reality and especially spirited, sensible, sexed, and social human flesh, is radically implicated" (Cooper, 2008, p. 263). Although non-Christians may, of course, find these claims radical, they should nonetheless see that they are at very least worthy of philosophical consideration. Because of the limits of human knowledge, as well as the contentious nature of all genuine inquiry, Cooper himself insists on "the need for dialogue, conversation, criticism, and correction" (2008, p. 163). Although one may not find them personally compelling, one should defend the importance of allowing philosophers room for openly "dwelling in these mysteries" (Cooper, 2008, p. 263).

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It has been the purpose of this chapter to establish the grounds for such a defense. First, by reviewing some of the relevant literature in the subdiscipline. Second, by calling attention to the importance of examining the definition of "religion". All too often philosophical analysis on the topic is undermined by faulty and or misleading assumptions regarding the nature and origins of religion. To date, sport philosophers' examinations have too often been superficial. Finally, I have asserted that there are two other principle areas of fundamental concern for those interested in the intersection of sport and religion; namely play and the nature of the human person. The point of focusing on these central concerns has not been to ignore other areas worthy of philosophic investigation (for example, prayer in sport), but rather to breathe new vitality into "sport and religion" in a way that a mere encyclopedic summary cannot. There are significant untapped resources available in both Christian and non-Christian spiritual traditions. Unfortunately, these resources are being misunderstood and under-utilized. Sport philosophy urgently needs a serious, sustained and broad engagement with both the nature of the concept "religion" as well as the specific spiritual traditions this concept is usually meant to represent.

Notes

1 Consider, for example, Richard Dawkins (2006) condescending evaluation of religious experience: "That is really all that needs to be said about personal 'experiences' of gods or other religious phenomena. If you've had such an experience, you may well find yourself believing firmly that it was real. But don't expect the rest of us to take your word for it, especially if we have the slightest familiarity with the brain and its powerful workings" (p. 92).

2 Further criticisms of secularization theory can be found in Asad (2003), Berger (1999, 2008), Cavanaugh (2009), and Jenkins (2007).

3 For example: "Dropping to a knee or pointing skyward after a touchdown, in full view of the television camera, presumably give God the glory. In fact, it calls attention to oneself. Ultimately, the Squad and the Me Generation play the same game. They are soul mates." While Baker's concern is legitimate, it would be made much stronger with qualifications. For instance he could have said, "*All too often*, it calls attention to oneself", which would have left room for authentic spontaneous acts of sincere worship, just as there can be authentic spontaneous acts of celebration.

4 Scarcity, for instance, often kept American colonists of any theological persuasion from recreation. "In short, like their contemporaries in the Chesapeake, migrants to the [Massachusetts] Bay Colony lacked the material culture to support a variety of recreations … horses and other domestic animals … were too few and too valuable to be used in sports" (Struna, 1997, p. 61).

5 However, they are hardly alone in having commented on things directly or indirectly relevant to a discussion of sport. Maximus the Confessor (2003, pp. 87, 92), for instance, a seventh-century Greek monk, argued that "The soul arises at conception simultaneously with the body to form one complete human being … There is no temporal hiatus of any kind within the nature itself or among the reciprocal parts of which it is constituted". Two other good repositories for citations related to sport or embodiment from the Church Fathers include, Alois Koch's (2012) essay, "Biblical and Patristic Foundations for Sport" and Ralph Ballou's (1973) essay, "An Analysis of the Writings of Selected Church Fathers to AD 394 to Reveal Attitudes Regarding Physical Activity."

6 "We should note, however, that that liberation [biblical criticism] signals a far-reaching change in the sense of 'inspiration' – from an authorized reorientation of life towards a *telos*, into a psychology of artistry whose source is obscure – and therefore becomes the object of speculation (belief/knowledge). It was a remarkable transformation. For in the former, the divine word, both spoken and written, was necessarily also material. As such, the inspired words were the object of a particular person's reverence, the means of his or her practical devotions at particular times and places. The body, taught over time to listen, to recite, to move, to be still, to be silent, engaged with the acoustics of words, with their sound, feel, and look. Practice at devotions deepened the inscription of sound, look, and feel in his sensorium. When the devotee heard God speak, there was a sensuous connection between inside and outside, a fusion between signifier and signified" (Asad 2003, pp. 37–8).

7 "The invention of Buddhism as a distinct religion was based on the discovery of Sanskrit texts that

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could be used to trace the origins of disparate rites in Asia back to the figure of Gautama. Buddhism was born as textual religion on the model of Protestantism. Once this work was done, the actual living manifestations of these rites were understood by Western scholars as corruptions from the original spirit of the texts … The Buddha was commonly presented – by Max Muller, among many others – as the 'Martin Luther of the East', a reformer who had rejected the ritualism of Hinduism to found a purely spiritual religion" (Cavenaugh 2009, p. 93).

8 Here again we see why "religion" is problematic. The assumptions of a transcendent/immanent framework are thoroughly theistic, as well as deeply if not exclusively Christian.

9 To put the other arguments all too briefly, the argument from order is based upon the universal human desire for structure over chaos, the argument from hope is based upon the experience that "human existence is always oriented towards the future" (Berger, 1969, p. 61), the argument from damnation is based upon the reality of evil and the tangible sense "that there are certain deeds that cry out to heaven" (p. 66), while the argument from humor is a result of the recognition of the limits of all human power (that is the "serious world"), as well as an "intimation of redemption" (p. 70).

10 Another source of liberation often found in play that is emphasized in Taoism is the freedom of "non-being"; that is, the freedom to live in the moment free of self-consciousness or reflective and paralyzing self-examination. "Less and less is done/Until non-action is achieved./When nothing is done, nothing is left undone" (Tzu, 1972, 50).

11 Such an admission need not descend into either syncretism or relativism. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church states: "The Catholic Church recognizes in other religions that search, among shadows and images, for the God who is unknown yet near since he gives life and breath and all things and wants all men to be saved. Thus, the Church considers all goodness and truth found in these religions as 'a preparation for the Gospel and given by him who enlightens all men that they may at length have life'" (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1993, Part one, Section two, Chapter three, article 9, para. 3, 843). Available online at www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM (accessed October 14, 2014).

12 Guardini (1994) also claims that scriptural evidence for play is apparent. It can be found in a description of the second person of the Trinity – the Son – found in the thirtieth and thirty-first verses of the eighth chapter of the book of Proverbs: "I was with him, forming all things, and was delighted every day, *playing* before him at all times, playing in the world" [Emphasis Added] (p. 110). Guardini interprets these verses, traditionally understood by Christians to be reflections on the role of Wisdom in creation, in light of the first chapter of the Gospel of John, where it states that "In the beginning was the Word" (John 1:1, NIV). Guardini (1994) argues that the second person of the Trinity is the Wisdom by whom, as the Creed says, "all things were made". He created not out of necessity, but rather joy, as the "Son 'plays' before the Father" (p. 110).

13 Mitchell's translation has been criticized by some for being too loose; I am not qualified to offer either an affirmation or a defense of that charge. In either instance, Mitchell's translation sheds light on the point I am trying to make regarding play.

14 This idea of transcendence – of creation and our experience of it pointing beyond itself – was given profound theological expression in St. Augustine's *Confessions*: "Let these transient things be the ground on which my soul praises you (Ps. 145: 2), 'God creator of all'. But let it not become stuck in them and glued to them with love through the physical senses" (1991, p. 62).

15 One might argue that such a claim is too idealized. That it reflect the needs and desires of the philosopher rather than those of the sport practitioner. Don't the sport marketer, the sport parent and the sports fan all have purposes in mind (e.g. revenue, scholarships, accolades, championships)? I do not deny this point. My point is simple. Insofar as those purposes go they are justifiable, but they are by themselves insufficient. There is nothing wrong with profit, championships, etc. Nevertheless, a view of sport that reduces sport to its utility is a truncated, incomplete and ultimately unsatisfactory view. Instrumental goods are good but they are not – by definition – ends in themselves. "Man does not live on bread alone" (Luke 4; 4, NIV). Therefore, "although the stomach is good, there is much more to a human being than his stomach and much more to human life than filling it" (Twietmeyer, 2008, 457).

16 John Henry Newman makes a similar point regarding the interpersonal nature of spiritual conversion: "To the world indeed at large he witnesses not; for few can see him near enough to be moved by his manner of living. But to his neighbours he manifests the Truth in proportion to their knowledge of him; and some of them, through God's blessing, catch the holy flame, cherish it, and in their turn transmit it. And thus in a dark world Truth still makes way in spite of the darkness, *passing from hand to hand*" (Newman, 2007 [emphasis added]).

17 This same concern is given supreme visual expression in the charcoal drawing "Virgin Mary Suckling the Christ Child" by the renaissance artist Albrecht Dürer. The drawing beautifully captures the radical claim of the Incarnation.

18 "These two moments [the virgin birth and the resurrection] are a scandal to the modern spirit. God is 'allowed' to act in ideas and thoughts, in the spiritual domain – but not in the material. That is shocking. He does not belong there. But that is precisely the point: God is God and he does not operate merely on the level of ideas. In that sense, what is at stake in both of these moments is God's very godhead. The question that they raise is: does matter also belong to him?" (Benedict XVI 2012, 56–7).

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