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## How Religious Influence has Developed Sports into a Faith of its Own

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How Religious Influence has Developed Sports into a Faith of its Own

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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## Preface

What are the thoughts that come to mind when one thinks of the last day of the week, Sunday? Between the day of Saturday and Monday, Sunday is often seen as a day of rest in most Western countries, as in between the weekend and weeknight. For most observant Christians, Sunday is observed as a day of worship and rest, holding it as the Lord's Day and the day of Christ's resurrection. For most Christians the custom and obligation of Sunday rest is not as strict as one would think. A minority of Christians do not regard the day they attend church as important, so long as they attend. However, those who do decide to go experience much ritualistic behavior among the members of the church.

There's a lot that goes into the Catholic tradition of Sunday mass. Once awake early Sunday morning, you then must put on their nice outfit to make sure you look presentable. When you arrive at the Church, you walk through the giant front doors where you then must dip your fingers in holy water and perform the sign of the cross. Next, you must roam the aisles searching for your favorite pew. As soon as you select your pew, you must bow, again perform the sign of the cross, and then you may be seated. Once the service begins, the organist starts playing a predetermined song in which everyone in the church is standing and singing to. As everyone is singing, the priest along with his clergy enter down the middle aisle until they reach their "thrones" in the front of the church near the altar. During the mass, there's a ton of calls and responses. Such activities include reciting hymns and songs, praying while kneeling on a padded plank, and listening to the Gospel and the homily. After all of this comes the eucharist. As everyone in the church kneels, the priest raises the bread and wine above his head reciting the words of Jesus at the Last Supper. Everyone who has officially taken part in the Sacrament of

Confirmation before is then invited to go up and receive the “body and blood” of their lord and savior. Finally, once the eucharist is concluded, the priest says his final remarks, everyone stands and sings as the clergy exits and concludes the mass.

This is the whole process that goes into a typical Sunday mass. There are rituals, symbols, recitations and performances that go into just a couple hours of worship. The question that arises is whether the characteristics and rituals performed at Sunday mass are considered religion? In other words, can this type of atmosphere only be found in a religious place of worship? Could there be another setting in which a community gathers to praise something they believe in on a particular day? Could this possible setting also consist of many rituals and traditions in which the people who worship can also participate? This process of Sunday mass seems to be a very specific type of routine in which only people who believe in the Christian values can participate in.

However, this sense of community value and worship can be found in a completely different kind of setting on Sundays. A place where you are supposed to be crazy and rowdy instead of quiet and respectful. A place where you are a fanatic instead of a worshipper. This is where instead of dressing business casual you dress in nothing but body paint, shorts and a foam finger. A place where instead of entering through the chapel doors and finding holy water, you enter through stadium doors where you give your ticket to the ticketer to scan. Instead of kneeling at your pew before you enter, you scream in excitement once you realize how close your seats are to the fifty yard line. Instead of starting off standing and singing hymns, you stand with your hand on your heart reciting the national anthem of your country. Throughout the event

you observe as the “clergy” put forth all their effort in order to please the following of what they stand for.

This type of event is nothing but a sports game. A place where spectators gather to cheer and root for their respective team. Their favorite team could be newly found or passed down generation to generation. Like a church keeps relics, a fan could carry memorabilia and merchandise supporting their team. Even if you cannot go to the game, you have means to worship your team by watching on television, radio and social media. The means by which the spectator could gather with a community on a certain day to praise their certain team displays aspects in which are found in religion. The increasing attention of sports across the world has brought people together in a peaceful way in which people could communicate and worship through physical sport. Outside the field of play, athletes and teams create a following which make them responsible for putting out an image in how they would like to be represented. Some athletes may be praised for their competitive spirit and outstanding athletic ability while some are downgraded for their failures and even unfairness and corruption within their careers and lives.

The integration between sports and religion is more substantial than one would expect. Sports have been present since the times of the Mayans and have always been an outlet for people to express themselves and let loose during physical activity. Athletics have evolved worldwide and are currently one of the biggest components of popular culture we have today. This emergence of athletes as social figures has brought a worship that is like no other. With endless ways to promote oneself now, such as through public exposure and merchandise, athletes have emerged as the closest thing worthy of being deemed a “god” on earth. With famous

athletes being the exemplary people of sports such as Jesus was the exemplary person of Christianity, people now have “superhero” like figures to look up to and aspire to be while pursuing the game that they love or convinced to love through their worshipping of the sport. Along with athletes, stadiums and sports related settings have developed a significance worth a visit. The baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York attracts over a quarter-million people every year. Before they enter the hall, people go through the “Sacred Ground” exhibit. Upon entering, visitors pass through stone arch, representing the separation of the baseball world from the profane outside world

Sports have added another ritual to our Sundays. Now, after mass finishes in the morning, people gather in someone's backyard with a charcoal grill all wearing the same jerseys to worship something outside of their religious faith, their favorite team. With religion and sports both containing the elements of ritual, tradition, worship, and participants, there is an argument that sports are emerging as a faith of their own.

## **Chapter 1: History of Sports and Religion**

Throughout time, humanity has invented sports primarily as a means to display skills and physical prowess, as well as to entertain or offer excitement to others. Sports have always been used as a way to improve and develop skills such as unity and stability amongst men and women worldwide. This unity has offered means of inner peace for many and has created a community in which people can bond over a shared passion. Like religion, sports convey important lessons about values and culturally appropriate behavior. The lessons they teach are similar, and both religion and sports use symbols as their primary means of communication.

Religion and sports are two major institutions that compose the social landscapes in the lives of many. In their work, *Religion and Sport: The Meeting of Sacred and Profane*, Stanley Eitzen and Geroge H. Sage proposed that religious values are inherent in sport ideology. In this sense, “sport embodies religious values including character development, hard work, and perseverance, and, like religion, it promotes and inculcates these qualities and behaviours.”<sup>1</sup> With sports being, for the most part, a positive way of enforcing these characteristics, the role of religion as it pertains to its involvement with sports remains an area to investigate. There are issues pertaining to prayer during the midst of athletic competition which many believe do not uphold a “wall of separation” between religion and sports. With their being a complex relationship between sports and religion and how they use each other, it must be established what they are individually.

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<sup>1</sup>Eitzen, D.S. and Sage, G.H. “Sport and religion.” *Religion and Sport: The Meeting of Sacred and Profane* Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992.



*Religion* is defined as “Human beings relation to that which they regard as holy, sacred, spiritual, divine. It is commonly regarded as consisting of a person’s relation to God or to gods or spirits. Worship is probably the most basic element of religion, but moral conduct, right belief and participation in religious institutions are generally also constituent elements of the religious life as practised by believers and as commanded by religious sages and scriptures.”<sup>2</sup> I agree with this definition because of the relationship with a sacred and divine. The comfort and security of religion comes from the thought of a greater and omnipotent being whom we try to please in our time on earth. This leads into the second important aspect of the definition in which people worship this certain god or divine being. The act of worshipping a greater presence certifies the fact of devoting part of your life to a spiritual being in which I find to be a key part of religion. Religion is thus seen in one such model where all the rules, norms, values, truth, and principles come out with one common meaning or belief. This requires a community in which worship and practices the same ritualized behavior according to their religion. In many traditions, this relation and these concerns are expressed in terms of “one’s relationship with or attitude toward gods or spirits; in more humanistic or naturalistic forms of religion, they are expressed in terms of one’s relationship with or attitudes toward the broader human community or the natural world.”<sup>3</sup> Whether in support or against what is going on in the natural world, different religions feel different about life and how it should be lived and whom for. Along with this, religions provide systems of meanings that can be used to make sense out of one’s life. Because religion is related to the sacred and supernatural, it can be used as a powerful basis for social control on

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<sup>2</sup> Stefon, Matt. “Religion.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 2019, [www.britannica.com/topic/religion](http://www.britannica.com/topic/religion).

<sup>3</sup> Stefon 2019

both the individual and group levels. It is because of this duality of helping the self and helping a community in which sports seem to be instilled within religion.

Sports are physical contests that have certain goals and challenges that the participants must acknowledge and work for based on the rules of the particular sport. Although definitions of sports vary, many scholars agree that sports are institutionalized competitive activities that involve rigorous physical exertion or the use of relatively complex skills by participants motivated by internal and external rewards.<sup>4</sup> The most important parts of this definition are the use of skill and the motivation of internal and external rewards. Sports are compelling due to the athlete's skill and work that they put into their sport. To be able to watch certain people accomplish incredible physical achievements motivates others athletes to play to their full potential resulting in great competition. The aspects of fair competition and strive to achieve greatness is what puts sports on a level on their own. The most common way of knowing sports is through the act of "play." According to German theorist Carl Diem, play is, "purposeless activity, for its own sake, the opposite of work."<sup>5</sup> However, the act of playing sports requires voluntary action in which the participants have a desire to play their respective sports in order to achieve a desired result. Sports can also be defined as autotelic, playing for their own sake. Based on this definition, the aspect of "play" can then be broken down into either spontaneous or regulated based on whether the game is formally organized or not.

The role of religion is comparable to sports in that it fosters community. Victor Turner's *The Ritual Process* discusses the relationship between the concepts of liminality and

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<sup>4</sup> Coakley, Jay. *Sport in Society: Issues and Controversies*. (9th ed.). St. Louis, MO: MosbyYear Book, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Guttman, Allen. *From Ritual to Record: the Nature of Modern Sports*. Columbia University Press, 2012.

“communitas” that arise from his analysis of rituals, and their codependence with the concept of structure. Turner defines structure as, “[a] differentiated, and often hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions with many types of evaluation, separating men in terms of more or less.”<sup>6</sup> Turner then defines communitas as, “society as an unstructured or rudimentary structured and relatively undifferentiated comitatus, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders.”<sup>7</sup> According to Turner, there must be a balance between communitas and structure in order to survive. In this case, there needs to be a temporary suspension of structure when communitas are performing certain rituals. It is with this balance of structure and community which allows people to interact in a well-mannered way.

Religion forms friendships within communities through social recreation. Most religions are very inclusive and “... religion advocates for love, brotherhood and social cohesion.”<sup>8</sup>

Similarly in sports, “[sports] act as physical outlets; they allow participants to work out aggressive energies and emotions through involvement in the competitive recreational activity”<sup>9</sup>

The competitiveness of sports allows for a community in which people can be free and give it all they got for the means of fair competition.

Along with community, religion provides an outlet from material life with spiritual goals, “concerned with the sacred and supernatural realm.”<sup>10</sup> In a similar sense, the way the athlete

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<sup>6</sup> Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process*. Routledge & Paul, 1970, 96.

<sup>7</sup> Turner 96

<sup>8</sup>Okou, F.T. and Jona, I.N, “SPORTS AND RELIGION.” ASIAN JOURNAL OF MANAGEMENT SCIENCES AND EDUCATION, Leena and Luna International, 2012, [[http://www.ajmse.leena-luna.co.jp/AJMSEPDFs/Vol.2\(1\)/AJMSE2013\(2.1-04\).pdf](http://www.ajmse.leena-luna.co.jp/AJMSEPDFs/Vol.2(1)/AJMSE2013(2.1-04).pdf)]

<sup>9</sup> Stefon 2019

<sup>10</sup> Okou 2013

pursues achievement results in them gaining a status that is almost “godly” in that they are promoting themselves through their achievements. Through the display of their skill, athletes have “accessible ways of gaining respect and admiration... As entertainment, they provide diversion from the demands of day-to-day living and allow the spectator to enjoy much of the experience of play without actual involvement.”<sup>11</sup> In a way, athletes can be seen as god-like figures in that their physical and athletic abilities allow them to do things that many people simply cannot. Whether it's throwing a ball super fast or hitting a ball very far, athletes stand out in that they do things in which people find impossible to do themselves.

Another trait shared between religion and sport is teaching in self-discipline. Self-discipline is a characteristic that only certain people can achieve. The reason self-discipline is hard to achieve is because it is a process that requires patience and a right mindset. Considering how outside factors could easily have an impact on this process, it therefore makes it exclusive in that it can be earned by those who are determined and prepare themselves properly. Once achieving self-discipline, an individual can allow an individual to withstand temptation and become a stronger person on the inside.

Religion promotes self-discipline; “the mind is always put to rest in a state of relaxation during the examination of conscience.”<sup>12</sup> This often gives people a reliable source to come to while dealing with times of stress and depression. For example, religion can be used to help coaches and athletes deal with stressful situations. Utilizing religious practices has been commonly implemented by coaches as a means of supplementing practical athletic techniques. Prayer has been found throughout professional sports, collegiate sports, and even youth sports.

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<sup>11</sup> Okou 2013

<sup>12</sup> Okou 2013

Eitzen and Sage suggest, “prayer is perhaps the most frequently employed use of religion by coaches and athletes”<sup>13</sup> Athletes usually ask in prayer for protection in competition, for good performance, and even prayer for victory. Along with prayer instilling confidence in athletes, sports instill discipline through the rules and regulations in a game. This forces the participants to co-exist through the rules of the game, almost like law in a community.

Spectators are also involved in this “community” in that they get to experience the emotional aspect of the competition without the physical aspect. It serves as a way to “provoke intense excitement and emotional commitment from individuals and troops (groups). It helps in the management of stress, whether as a spectator or participant.”<sup>14</sup> The sense of community through sports is a great way to make friends and socialize while playing the game you love. Spectators feel this same sense of community through meeting up with friends, whether it be at the event or a restaurant or even a friends house, to eat some snacks and watch the big game. Though sports are seen as a way of entertainment and to display skills, it is also very therapeutic and a way for people to escape their everyday lives just as religion is a way for people to escape reality for a greater presence. With a plethora of more commonalities to be discussed between sports and religion in chapter three, it is important to remember the close relationship that religion and sports have.

In modern day culture, sports are marketed in a secular way in which everybody can join. If anything, sports in today’s world are meant to free a space from religion in which people can just play a game. With religion now having little to no influence on sports, the consequences of

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<sup>13</sup>Eitzen, Sage 163

<sup>14</sup>Okou 2013

the game's result have become less severe as well. Although this is no surprise to modern day athletes that life will go on after losing a match, this was not always the case.

In the sixteenth century, an ancient ball game was played both by the Aztecs and the Mayans which was associated with human sacrifice. The contest was actually a revision of an ancient Mesoamerican game that was played by many people including both the Mayans and the Aztecs. The Aztec ball game had a distinctive court known as the *tlachtli* or *tlachco*, usually shaped similar to the letter "i." Surrounding the court were areas for spectators, nobles and judges to watch. The structure would often include skull racks that had a base with upright wood posts. These were often the players who were sacrificed after the competition. Bars ran from post to post containing the skulls of the victims who were sacrificed. Sometimes the walls would show reliefs of the winners and losers of the past. The ball, or *ulli*, was made of hard rubber and weighed about 9 pounds.<sup>15</sup> Due to the rough surface of the court itself, protective gear was worn by the players. Players wore deerskin guards for the chin, hip, thigh, hands, and cheeks. Even with this protection, players would end the game bruised and bleeding, since they often had to throw themselves to the ground. The teams would face each other on the court. The object in the end was to get the ball through the stone hoop, which is considered very difficult to accomplish. One important rule was that the ball was never allowed to touch the ground. Players were not allowed to hold or even touch the ball with their hands, only with their elbows, knees, hips and head. With such difficult rules, the game was played by only the best athletes resulting in a very quick pace of play and lots of physical injury due to diving to keep the ball in the air.

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<sup>15</sup>Cótrill C., Jaimie. "Aztec Ball Game." *Aztec Ball Game*, 2006, [www.aztec-history.com/aztec-ball-game.htm].

With city-states and tribes playing against one another, it's not surprising that the Aztec ball game took on political significance. Winning and losing were taken very seriously though these competitions, often with the result of these games sometimes leading to assassinations or attacks. Gambling was common among spectators as well. Anything from feathers to even children could be wagered during these games. It was common for a person to actually sell themselves into slavery in order to pay off the debt. Kings would make huge wagers as well. There is a popular story told of two kings, one wagering a garden, another wagering a marketplace. The marketplace was lost, but the winning king was assassinated when a contingency from the loser congratulated him. They gave him a garland, with a leather strangling cord hidden inside.

The Aztec ball game had a great deal of ritual significance. It was meant to mirror the ball court of the heavens, this being the ball court of the underworld where the sun passed each night. The game represented the battle between day and night, and so was also related to the human blood sacrifices that were intended to keep the sun moving in the sky. It is said that the ball represented the head of a sacrificed victim. In Tenochtitlan, the ball court was at the foot of the blood stained stairs of the temple, and the ball game itself would often be a scene of sacrifice. It is believed that the losing coach, or even the whole team, might be sacrificed. Some historians have disputed this - because it was an honour to be sacrificed, it may have been the winning team that lost their lives.

For the Maya, the ballgame was based on their creation story called the Popol Vuh. This legend set the stage for the cycle of life, death and rebirth that was central to Mayan everyday life and the ballgame. The story goes as follows:

The gods who created the earth and its inhabitants were also ballplayers. The gods had some difficulty making humans, but finally achieved success with two brothers, Hun Hunahpu and Vucub Hunahpu. Like their creators, the brothers loved to play ball. They played so often that the bouncing rubber ball disturbed the gods who lived in the Underworld of Xibalba. To stop the noisy ballplayers, the Lords of Xibalba decided to trap the brothers. They invited Hun Hunahpu and Vucub Hunahpu to a game. The boys were killed and buried in the ballcourt. As a final insult, the head of Hun Hunahpu was displayed in a tree. When an Underworld goddess named Xquic approached the tree, the head of Hun Hunahpu spat in her hand. She became pregnant, and was forced to leave the Underworld. Now living on earth, Xquic gave birth to twins who she named Hunahpu and Xbalanque. Half-god and half-human, the twins grew into greater ballplayers than their fathers, once again disturbing the Lords of Xibalba. The angry Lords made several attempts to trick and kill the twins, but the boys escaped every time. The twins recover the bodies of their father and uncle, placing them in the sky as the sun and the moon. Hunahpu and Xbalanque become known as the Hero Twins, the greatest ballplayers in Mesoamerican history.

This story is significant because it shows the impact and power that the ball game had in the times of the Mayans. For the Mayans, the underworld Xibalba is seen as evil and is shown not to enjoy when the brothers play the ball game. I think this part of the story is intriguing in that it might serve as encouragement to other Mayans to play the ball game in order to honor



Hun Hunahpu and Vucub Hunahpu. The brothers were seen as extraordinary athletes due to their half-god and half-human nature. They were able to defeat evil while gaining vengeance on their father and uncle's death, which can be seen as quite noble. I think it is because of this story that this ball game is seen as such an honor to play. Not only are you established as a great athlete to play, however you also establish yourself as an honorable person who plays the game for the fallen and sacrificed players in the past along with going against the evil of the underworld. The myth of Popol Vuh is indeed the origin of the ball game and continues to be the standard on how and why the game should be played.

Along with the Aztecs and Mayans, there are another group indigenous people in the region of Mexico known for their foot running called the Raramuri. The Raramuri are a group of about 50,000 to 70,000 people that live in the Sierra Tarahumara canyons of Mexico. When the Spanish first encountered the Raramuri people in the 1500s, calling them by their Spanish name "Tarahumara." Rather than engaging in armed conflict, as the Aztec did, the Raramuri moved to live in the remote areas of Copper Canyon in Northwest Mexico, better known as the Sierra Tarahumara. As the Raramuri live in remote settlements in rocky canyons, it is easier to travel between communities on foot rather than in a motorized vehicle or on the back of an animal. Over the centuries, these people have become so accustomed to running, especially over great distances and rugged terrain, that even their names, in their native language, means "runners". Recently, some Raramuri have competed in marathons and ultramarathons, races covering 100 miles or more. They often win or place quite well, to the vexation of other runners who cannot fathom losing to runners wearing sandals made from old tires and who occasionally stop to take a smoke break along the trail.

Besides a means of travel between villages, the Raramuri also run as part of their hunting style, known as persistence hunting. This isn't to say it's a high-speed chase. They just continuously pursue the animal, not allowing it to rest, until it becomes slow and tired enough for the Raramuri hunters to close in and kill it. Living in high altitudes, they have developed tremendous lung capacity and in more primitive times hunted deer and mountain goats, running them down on foot.

Running also plays a large part in Raramuri games and sports. A favorite game, called *Rarjiparo*, is a combination of soccer, a relay race, and a marathon. Teams of runners will kick a wooden ball, a different ball per team, as they run along a footpath. This ball is made from oak tree or any other type of tree roots, and then they have to run barefoot after it till they grab it. At certain intervals, one runner will pass the ball to the next runner then race ahead to the next relay point.<sup>16</sup> Some races only take a few hours and cover shorter distances, but some races will last for days and cover over 100 miles. Everybody in the community helps and supports the runners; they provide water and ground corn for them, lighting their way at night with lit wood sticks, cheering them and even running after them along the route. This craziest part about all of this is that the runners run barefoot. They do this because of the tradition of their ancestors that ran before them. Running not only has become a way of community and interaction for the Raramuri but their beloved sport has turned into a way of life.

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<sup>16</sup>Janowitz, Nathaniel. "Mexico's Indigenous Raramuri Runners Chase Olympic Dreams." *ESPN*, ESPN Internet Ventures, November 3, 2017, [www.espn.com/sports/endurance/story/\_/id/20717258/why-marathons-too-short-mexico-indigenous-raramuri-runners-why-change].

Another athletic event known for its fierce competition and devotion to the gods were the Greek Olympics. The aspects of Greek athletics were very intertwined and connected with the gods in many ways. The Olympian games were held in honor of Zeus, ruler of the sky, whose worship was centered on Mount Olympus, also the site of his marriage to Hera. The festival and the games were held in Olympia, a rural sanctuary site in the western Peloponnesos. The Greeks that came to the Sanctuary of Zeus at Olympia shared the same religious beliefs and spoke the same language. The athletes were all male citizens of the city-states from every corner of the Greek world, coming from as far away as Iberia in the west and the Black Sea in the east.<sup>17</sup> The sanctuary was named after Mount. Olympos, the highest mountain in mainland Greece and home of the greatest of the Greek gods and goddesses. The ancient Olympic Games began in the year 776 BC, when a cook from the nearby city of Elis named Koroibos won the stadion race, which is a foot race that is 600 feet long.<sup>18</sup> Many literary traditions state that this was the only athletic event of the games for the first 13 Olympic festivals or until 724 BC.<sup>19</sup> Starting from 776 BC, the Olympic Games were held in Olympia every four years for almost 12 centuries.

During the ancient Olympic games, the marathon was not an event. The marathon is a modern event that was first introduced in the Modern Olympic Games of 1896 in Athens, a race from Marathon northeast of Athens to the Olympic Stadium, a distance of 40 kilometers. The distance of the modern marathon was standardized as 26 miles, or 42.195 kilometers in 1908 when the Olympic Games were held in London. The race commemorates the run of

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<sup>17</sup> Romano, David. "The Games: The Real Story of the Ancient Olympic Games - Penn Museum." *The Games | The Real Story of the Ancient Olympic Games - Penn Museum*, 2008, [[www.penn.museum/sites/olympics/olympicorigins.shtml](http://www.penn.museum/sites/olympics/olympicorigins.shtml)].

<sup>18</sup> Romano 2008

<sup>19</sup> Romano 2008

Pheidippides, an ancient “day-runner” who carried the news of the Persian landing at Marathon of 490 B.C. to Sparta in order to enlist help for the battle.

There were three other games of ancient Greece that worshipped the gods: the Pythian games, the Isthmian games and the Nemean games. The Pythian games were held at Delphi, a sanctuary called Pytho. On this spot, the god Apollo had according to the myth killed the dragon Python. The Apollo sanctuary originated in the tenth century BC and became world famous for its oracle. In early times, a contest in singing a hymn for the god was held there every eight years. In 586 BC, a power struggle on the control over the sanctuary unfolded between the nearby city Crisa and the amphictyony, a league of twelve surrounding tribes who had sworn to defend the interests of the cult. The amphictyony took control of the sanctuary and added other musical events and sports contests in which quite early women could take part as well. The year 586 BC is therefore considered the foundation date of the Pythian games.

Greek geographer Pausanias explained when the different events were introduced at the Pythian games:

“They added a contest for singing accompanied by a flute and for playing the flute. As victors were proclaimed: Melanpous of Kephalai in the kithara-singing, Echembrotos of Arkadia in singing accompanied by a flute and Sakadas of Argos in playing the flute. This Sakadas won two more victories at the next two Pythian games. It is in this year they also offered prizes for athletes for the first time. The events were the same as those at Olympia, except for the four-horse chariot, and they added the dolichos and the diaulos for boys themselves. At the second Pythian games (582 BC) they did not invite them to compete for prizes anymore, but from then on they made the games crown-games. They

also abolished the singing accompanied by a flute, because they found the sound of it inauspicious ... They added a horse race: Kleisthenes, the tyrant of Sikyon, was proclaimed as victor in the race for four-horse chariots.”<sup>20</sup>

The Pythian games belonged to the *periodos* and were held every four years in the summer, always in the third year of an *olympiad*. From the sixth century onwards, The Olympic, Pythian, Nemean and Isthmian games distinguished themselves due to international participation. These four games formed a kind of circuit: the Isthmian games took place in the spring of the same year as the Olympic and Pythian games. The Nemean games took place in the alternative years. Winning these four games for your country is considered a “*periodos*” winner. Even after the introduction of sports contests the musical events remained the most important. The program went as following:

Day 1: religious ceremonies (sacrifice, performance of the mythical struggle between Apollo and Python and procession)

Day 2: a large banquet

Day 3: musical contests

Day 4: athletic contests

Day 5: horse races

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<sup>20</sup> “Pausanias X 7, 2-8.” *Ancient Olympics*, KU Leuven, 2012, [<http://ancientolympics.arts.kuleuven.be/sourceEN/D011EN.html>].

Originally, the winner of the games would receive a larger crown. However, after reading a poem from an unknown Greek poet of the time, the winner did not receive anything close to a crown. The poem goes as follows:

There are four games in Greece, four sacred games,  
Two celebrate mortals, two immortal gods :  
Zeus, the son of Leto, Palaimon and Archemoros.  
The prizes are an olive branch, apples, selery and fir tree.

Zeus and the olive branch represent the Olympic games. For the Pythian games the poet names the son of Leto, Apollo, and apples rather than the better known laurel crown. This shows how the Greeks celebrate and honor the gods by playing the games.

The Isthmian games were held near Corinth, in a rural sanctuary on the Isthmos, which is the small neck of land that connects the Peloponnesian peninsula with Central Greece. They were organized by the city of Corinth, until 146 BC, when Corinth was completely destroyed by the Romans. For some time the games were moved to the city Sicyon. In 40 BC, Corinth got hold of the organization again and about AD 40 the games moved back to the Isthmos. The Isthmian games were part of the *periodos*. They were held in the spring of the first and the third year of every olympiad. The games were dedicated to Poseidon and Palaimon, a hero from one of the foundation myths of slaying the Minotaur. Already in the eleventh century BC, there was a cult place for Poseidon on the Isthmos. The temple was built in the early seventh century and the games were founded in 582 BC. The program consisted of three parts. The horse races were the most important part for these games, for Poseidon was the patron of this sport. Besides there were athletic contests and from the fifth century onwards also musical contests. The prize was

originally a crown of pine branches. In the fifth century BC, this was replaced by a crown of dried celery, as shown in the previous poem.

A sense of political propaganda was given to some through the Isthmian games. Titus Quinctius Flaminius was a Roman politician who led the Roman conquest of Greece. In 197 BC, he defeated Philip V of Macedon in the battle of Battle of Cynoscephalae in Italy. This forced Philip to give up all his conquered Greek states to Flaminius. In 196 BC Flaminius appeared at the Isthmian Games and proclaimed the freedom of the Greek states. Here, Polybius describes the reaction of the spectators when Quinctius Flaminius proclaimed the freedom of the Greeks:

While the people were in such a state of uncertainty, the crowd had been assembled in the stadion for the games. The herald came forward and, having silenced the crowd with the sound of the trumpet, he proclaimed the following: "The senate of Rome and Titus Quinctius, proconsul and imperator, having defeated king Philip and the Macedonians, declare the following peoples free, without garrison, or tribute, in full enjoyment of their ancestral laws: the Corinthians, the Phocians, the Locrians, the Euboians, the Achaians Phthians, the Magnesians, the Thessalians and the Perrhaibians." After this beginning there was immediately a tremendous applause. Some had not heard the proclamation, others wanted to hear it again. The majority could not believe it and thought that they had heard what had been said there in a kind of dream because what had happened was so incredible. Everyone shouted for his own reasons to the herald and the trumpeter to come back in the middle of the stadion and to proclaim the same once more. I think that they

did not only want to hear, but also to see the herald because they could not believe what was proclaimed.<sup>21</sup>

These games presented a setting in which the Greeks were united in a community where they were given news about their freedom from the Romans. Along with the political influence, the Isthmos was easy to reach both from land as from sea, and was therefore a natural meeting place. Corinth was also a large and important city, unlike Elis or Delphi.

Last of the four Ancient Greek games were the Nemean games. Founded in 573 BC, the Nemean took place at Nemea, a sanctuary dedicated to Zeus, in whose honour the games were held. According to the foundation myth, the games started as funeral games for prince Opheltes, also called Archemoros, who died at Nemea as a baby. Originally the games were held in Kleonai, a small town north of Nemea. At the end of the fifth century, however, Kleonai was taken over by Argos. Eventually in the mid-third century BC, the games themselves also moved to Argos. The Nemean games were held every two years, alternating with the Isthmian games. They took place in the summer of the year in which no Olympic or Pythian games were held. The program for the Nemean games originally contained only athletic contests and horse races, like the Olympic games. Musical contests were then added in the Hellenistic period. In the first century AD, there were also Nemean contests for girls. Victors were originally honoured with an olive crown. From the Persian wars onwards, just like the Isthmian games, this prize was replaced with a crown of wild celery.

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<sup>21</sup>Hultsch, Friedrich and Shucjburgh, Evelyn, "XVIII." *The Histories of Polybius*, Macmillan, 1889, 46.



Chariot races have also been used as a metaphor for the pursuit of immortality in the *Rgveda*, an ancient Indian collection of Vedic Sanskrit hymns and documents. There is one hymn in which the god Indra is asked to save the Vedic people from evil creatures and to receive the safety of heaven's light. The hymn states, "Save us, our Charioteer, from harm, O Indra, soon, very soon, make us win spoil of cattle.." <sup>22</sup> At the time of these horse chariot races, the winners received the prize of cows because their milk is seen as a symbol of immortality. This verse is significant in that it refers to Indra as a charioteer. In the *Rgveda*, Indra is described as strong willed, armed with a thunderbolt, and riding a chariot. It states, "May the strong Heaven make thee the Strong wax stronger: Strong, for thou art borne by thy two strong Bay Horses. So, fair of cheek, with mighty chariot, mighty, uphold us, strong-willed, thunder armed, in battle." <sup>23</sup> With this description of charioteers being mighty and strong, it is evident how appreciated they were hence why Indra was so relied on and praised in this hymn.

With athletics and religion having a relationship through multiple different cultures and religions, there wasn't always a bond with athletics for Christians. In the article, "When Christianity Was Muscular," by Brett and Kate McKay, they try to figure out why it is that women are more likely to be committed to the faith than men. McKay discusses how a gender imbalance during the Middle Ages led to more women attending church than men as far back as the 13th century. The imbalance created a compounding cycle of "feminization" that intensified in the 19th century which started to keep men away from church. In the 20th century, it was discovered that this problem of a lack of men resorted to a lack of physical activity within the

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<sup>22</sup>*Rig Veda: Rig-Veda, Book 3: HYMN XXXI. Indra,*  
[<https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rigveda/rv03031.html>]

<sup>23</sup>*Rig Veda: Rig-Veda, Book 5: HYMN XXXVI. Indra*

church resulting in a disconnect from the body and soul. The process and movement known to bring physical manliness back to Christianity was called “Muscular Christianity” which will be discussed in the next chapter.

## Chapter 2: Muscular Christianity

In 1902, Congregational minister John Scudder started a boxing class for the young men of his Jersey City church. Before being a congregational minister, Schudder was a graduate of Yale University where he was the captain of the football team. Schudder insisted, “If I had not devoted myself to sport, I would not be alive to-day. Religion and health go hand in hand.” Schudder was one of the many “body as temple” theologians of this era, who sought to glorify the body and make health a scriptural mandate.

Christianity historically has had a complex relationship with the body. Scripturally, a mind focused on the flesh is said to be in opposition to God. In the New Testament, it states, “Because the carnal mind *is* enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.”<sup>24</sup> This contradicts, however, that flesh plays a primary role in the act of salvation. As shown in the Bible, Jesus entered the world incarnate, suffered a painful death on the cross, resurrected from his dead body, and promised a similar resurrection to his disciples. Although many consider the body to be like that of a temple, Jesus gives little advice on specific ways for maintaining that temple, in fact telling his disciples not to worry about what they’re going to eat or drink. Jesus tells them, “Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on.”<sup>25</sup> Also, after being baptized by John the Baptist, Jesus fasted for 40 days and nights in the Judaeen Desert. Although Jesus was successful, it still is not a good example on how one should treat their body.

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<sup>24</sup> Romans 8:7 (King James Version).

<sup>25</sup> Matthew 6:25 KJV

Physical health, to Christians, was somewhat important, but not as vital as spiritual salvation. Athenian philosopher Plato created the “Theory of Forms” which asserts that the physical world is not really the ‘real’ world; instead, ultimate reality exists beyond our physical world. The soul and the body were two distinct things, and the flesh acted as a hindrance to beholding the Forms. The ultimate goal, then, was to transcend the flesh. Platonism led to influence one of the early church father’s Augustine. He liked the idea that the body and soul are two unified and yet entirely distinct entities that exist in conflict with each other. Between the body and soul, the soul was the superior substance. In order to help the soul get to heaven, early Christians ascetics tried to mortify or ignore the body by starving it, whipping it, or depriving it of sleep.

Exercising the body outside a productive purpose was seen by many Christians as an immoral waste of time, and training to get strong as an end in and of itself was largely a foreign concept. Augustine’s ideas specifically, spread through Western culture and the physical came to be associated with that which was base and shameful. This led Christianity to focus on spirit over body, by and large did not create societies with a significant focus on athletics. Some recreation was beneficial to the spirit, especially that which was productive like hunting and fishing. However, ball games and boxing were seen in a bad light due to the aspect of drinking and gambling that went along with it which could distract spiritual focus.

For cultural and economic reasons, the lack of men in the faith’s ranks had seemingly reached a crisis point and the only solution involved was the mind and body. In the late nineteenth century, decades after the Civil War, times were relatively peaceful on the battlefield, and industrialization was changing the economic landscape. With a shift from working in the

land to the factories, there was less of an opportunity for men to be paid for their hard labor considering the new machinery. This led to the “Victorian Man” coming into existence. This created a new standard for men to be self made and a devout Christian. As the 20th century approached, there grew concern in certain sectors of society that the softer qualities of this Victorian manhood had been focused on too much. Many people, including former president Theodore Roosevelt, saw that masculinity was in short supply. In a letter he wrote to G. Stanley Hall, Roosevelt proclaimed, “over-sentimentality, over-softness, in fact washiness and mushiness are the great dangers of this age and of this people. Unless we keep the barbarian virtues, gaining the civilized ones will be of little avail.”<sup>26</sup>

Using terms such as “washiness” and “mushiness” shows how soft, Roosevelt thought, men were becoming. While the lack of masculinity was mainly traced to secular institutions like schools, churches came in for a particularly large share of criticism. At the time, the congregation of the church was female with the exception of a few male ministers, who were also often not in peak physical form. The men who did not show up for services, however, were often found spending their time participating in activities like fraternal lodges, saloons, and secular sports.<sup>27</sup> With this necessity of masculinity in the church came the start of the muscular Christianity movement.

It was clear that men wanted some kind of connection between the physical body and the Christian church. Unitarian minister Thomas Wentworth Higginson, also an avid sportsman, published an article, “Saints, and Their Bodies,” which goes against the Puritan prohibitions on

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<sup>26</sup> Mann, Bonnie. *Sovereign Masculinity: Gender Lessons from the War on Terror*. Oxford University Press, 2014, 63.

<sup>27</sup> McKay, Brett, and Kate. “Muscular Christianity: Its History and Lasting Effects.” *The Art of Manliness*, July 16, 2019, [www.artofmanliness.com/articles/when-christianity-was-muscular].

physical activity. He proposes a new theology that conjoins the spirit with a healthy body, due to the fact that physical exertion elevates individual and social happiness. He does this by prescribing physical activities such as boxing, rowing, swimming, and walking as a means for creating a “well-regulated frame.” In his article, he writes:

To a well-regulated frame, mere physical exertion, even for an uninteresting object, is a great enjoyment, which is, of course, qualified by the excitement of games and sports. To almost every man there is joy in the memory of these things; they are the happiest associations of his boyhood. It does not occur to him that he also might be as happy as a child, if he lived more like one. What do most men know of the " wild joys of living," the daily zest and luxury of out-door existence, in which every healthy boy beside them revels? - skating, while the orange sky of sunset dies away over the delicate tracery of gray branches, and the throbbing feet pause in their tingling motion, and the frosty air is filled with the shrill sound of distant steel, the resounding of the ice, and the echoes up the hillsides? - sailing, beating up against a stiff breeze, with the waves thumping under the bow, as if a dozen sea-gods had laid their heads together to resist it?- climbing tall trees, where the higher foliage, closing around, cures the dizziness which began below, and one feels as if he had left a coward beneath and found a hero above? -the joyous hour of crowded life in football or cricket?<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Higginson, Thomas W. “The Atlantic Monthly/Volume 1/Number 5/Saints, and Their Bodies.” *The Atlantic Monthly/Volume 1/Number 5/Saints, and Their Bodies - Wikisource, the Free Online Library*, 1858.

The Muscular Christianity movement was never officially organized, or headed by a single person, but was instead a cultural trend that manifested itself in different ways and was supported by various figures, such as Higginson. Supporters of the movement sought to make the Christian faith more muscular both by strengthening the physical bodies of the faithful, and by pushing the church's culture and views. Muscular Christianity started to put a big emphasis on physical health. Muscular Christianity's philosophy on the physical body was based on several different premises. The first premise was that physical training builds the stamina necessary to perform service for others. The central point of the Muscular Christian philosophy was that the body should be made fit, not simply for health, but in order to make it a more effective tool for doing good in the world. Jesus' endurance in healing endless crowds of people was pointed to as proof of his having this kind of bodily stamina. This made his followers realize that the only way to perform the work of God to the best of your ability was through a healthy body. Horace Mann once referred to this saying, "All through the life of a pure-minded but feeble-bodied man, his path is lined with memory's gravestones, which mark the spots where noble enterprises perished, for want of physical vigor to embody them in deeds."<sup>29</sup> A man's life is filled with accomplishments and the want of physical hardships should motivate the man to take in and embody these tasks.

Next, the second premise was that physical strength leads to moral strength and good character. The aspects of physical strength and mental strength were not seen as unrelated for Muscular Christians. Disciplining one's body through athletic training builds one's will while physical strength allows one to push through the temptation and pain that comes with physical

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<sup>29</sup> *Appendix to the Journals of the Senate and Assembly of the Twenty-Eighth Session of the Legislature of the State of California*. State Office, J.D. Young, Supt. State Printing, 1889, 139.

labor. If one trains their mind to listen to their body, then one would essentially be able to train their mind to listen to their soul by following divine laws as well. Just as physical training prepares one for future obstacles, the training of the brain would prepare could better prepare someone for fulfilling future goals. Also, more simply, the physicality of sports allows an individual to clear their mind in order to have a clearer perspective of things. The mental aspect of strength is so important in that it allows an individual to show their full potential physically and also through the content of their character. Participating in competition has in fact been found to be a highly effective means by which to learn cooperation and other moral values.

Another premise developed by early Muscular Christians was that sports provided a platform to evangelize the “unchurched.” Many 19th century churches saw sports as a way to connect with the kind of highly masculine, tough guys they typically had so much trouble attracting. An 1894 article about the Rev. A. O. Jay, reports that the High Church clergyman had “discovered that the boxing-gloves are most useful, although considerably neglected weapons in the armory of the church.”<sup>30</sup> Jay worked in the poorest part of London’s East End, which inspired him to build an athletics club, which included a boxing ring right above his church. The club was open every night, and Jay would station himself by the door, taking memberships and shaking the hands of the men who came in. Absolutely no betting was allowed in this establishment. Not only did people come here wanting to fight, but the fighters also frequently found their way into the church’s pews, with services regularly attracting many more men. Jay also reported that participants in the club and church became less prone to violence among themselves, as well as towards their families, which was a common problem.

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<sup>30</sup> Mckay 2019



Although many criticized Jay saying that he was wrong for bringing people together to fight, Jay responded, “They may be hulking and they may be prize fighters, but even for them Christ died.”<sup>31</sup> Then, when questioned more about how boxing gloves are carnal, Jay supported his point stating, “I will venture to inform you there is one thing more carnal than the use of boxing-gloves, and that is to do what you do, neglect the sheep simply, and you call them black because of their utter inability to understand your narrow shibboleths.”<sup>32</sup> Jay’s boxing church club has led to many similar types of organizations today. In order to keep people off the street and committing crimes, many underground boxing and fight clubs have been established in order to prevent people from fighting illegally, which could resort to serious injury or death. These fight clubs allow individuals to brawl in a controlled setting where they are monitored and are allowed to release their vengeance in a clean and fair way. These kinds of fights have been popularized for the moral safety of it and simply the unprofessional scrappiness that comes along with it.

Lastly, one of the more simpler premises in which muscular Christianity was built upon was that physical sports and exercise connected boys and men with their masculinity. Muscular Christians saw athletics as a way for boys and men to reconnect with their masculinity. Athletics would allow men to appreciate and experience their God-given abilities. Sports also allowed men to fulfill their potential and step into their divinely-appointed roles as protectors of family, faith, and country. Exercise was seen as an avenue for building masculine traits like strength and confidence, while team sports acquainted men with a sense of honor and camaraderie. Team

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<sup>31</sup> Mckay 2019

<sup>32</sup> Mckay 2019

sports also taught men how to control their emotions and pain tolerance while competing with their squad. These improved qualities of being a good teammate also served as preparation for serving in actual war. It was thought that what athletes learned on the playing field would translate to the battlefield. Many agreed with the view on sports that William James had, in which he said sports were, “a moral equivalent of war... a way to exercise, inculcate, and preserve masculine and martial virtues in times of peace.”<sup>33</sup> While muscular Christians supported all kinds of sports, it was for this reason that they especially championed more “martial” ones like boxing and wrestling. Building up the physical body gave a better picture of the gentler virtues of Christianity. Without a structure supporting the faith’s softer side, its virtues tended to droop and sag, and come off as mealy rather than noble and respectable. If a man is able to not only preach his ideas but physically stand up for them as well, he will garner more respect and attention. He who clearly could fight back, but willfully choose not to, would still be given more respect than he whose forced surrender.

With these premises, Muscular Christianity grew throughout America. After the Civil War, urban evangelicals started to reconsider their position on sports. In 1884, Endicott Peabody founded Groton School in Massachusetts. Athletics was a core curricular element of the school, as Peabody had learned the muscular Christian ethos during his schooling in Great Britain. While more preparatory academies followed Groton’s lead, the first American YMCA was established in New York City in 1852. Intended as a haven for young men and an alternative to saloons and brothels, physical recreation was not originally part of the YMCA’s mission. By the end of the century, however, nearly all of the YMCA’s had gymnasiums. Luther Gulick emerged as a

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<sup>33</sup>Mckay 2019

leading spokesperson for the YMCA. He wrote about the values of physical exercise and competition.

In 1891, Gulick encouraged James Naismith to invent a game that eventually became basketball. As a Presbyterian minister, Naismith spent his life spreading the game in a missionary-like way. This convinced many that it was a suitable physical expression of Christianity. Among those influenced by Naismith's game was Senda Berenson. She introduced basketball to the women of Smith College one year after Naismith had invented it. Although women's athletics was supported at the time, there were thoughts that competition would make women too manly and could threaten their reproductive capabilities. In response to this common opinion, Berenson negotiated a place for women in competitive sports. Concerned about the potential roughness of basketball, she devised rules in which risk decreased the risk of possible injuries. As the game spread at women's colleges, Berenson's new rules were eventually formalized for women's basketball. These rules were significant in that young women required both "a strong physique" as well as "moral courage." She thought basketball was a way of nurturing these traits, while also stressing selflessness. Berenson proclaimed that the game revolved around individual decisions and acts done "for the good of the team—the cause."<sup>34</sup>

Muscular Christianity was a spontaneous yet necessary movement in religious and general history. Muscular Christians did the work of transforming the nation's religious philosophy by including sports. For them, bodily fitness was a necessary condition for both personal growth and strength. In the 20th century, we witnessed a growth in religious, ethnic, and racial diversity. With this development came a broader and more complicated American

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<sup>34</sup> Melnick, Ralph. *Senda Berenson: the Unlikely Founder of Women's Basketball*. Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 2007, 76- 77.

ethos that prized the muscular endeavors of sports. So, such groups like Catholics, Jews, African Americans, and women would use sports to burst into this new way of life, to translate their bodily movements in religious terms. The place where civil religion and sports meet, however, would be characterized by conflict and competition. This new combination challenged the “norm” and forced the nation to step out of their comfort zone. Despite such a competition between sports and religion, there are so many characteristics shared in which allows for the relationship to exist.

### **Chapter 3: Intertwining Characteristics**

The involvement of religion within sports has displayed common characteristics within the two institutions. Considering such a rich history dating back to the time of the Aztecs, sports and religion have shared many commonalities which allowed them to co-exist for such a long time. In the book, *Religion and Sports in American Culture*, Jefferey Scholes and Rapahel Sassower explore the relationship between religion and sports through modern America. The two display how tightly intertwined sports are through using a variety of historical examples from the Mayans to the Olympics and especially modern day stories of professional athletes and their involvement with their faith. Although sports has seemingly taken over as a religion, Sassower and Scholes assert that sports is not replacing religion nor is it a religion of its own. Instead, they see both religion and sports as independent institutions that are self-sufficient enough to maintain their own integrity and legitimacy. With this secular approach, the seven chapters of the book are titled based on shared characteristics between religion and sports. Although all of the characteristics are shared, I only found three of the chapters to be essential and or could include multiple characteristics. The chapters I found essential were Belief, Sacrifice, and Competition. These chapters break down each characteristic within a religious and sports context allowing the concept between the two sides to be displayed. You must believe what you pray or practice, athletes and worshippers sacrifice time of their day for their passion, and there's always competition within ourselves to strive to be the best at what we do. The authors provide great insight from modern day superstars and medieval theologians in order to demonstrate sports becoming, however not taking over, religion through common characteristics.

## **Belief**

Belief is clearly the prominent characteristic between both sport and religion. In the 1980 Winter Olympics, the United States shook the world as their team, composed of a bunch of college hockey players, defeated the dominant Soviet Union. One of the most famous broadcast clips and calls is when the Americans stormed the ice after they won throwing their gear in the air as they tackled their goalie. Broadcaster Al Michaels was ecstatic as he made the call, counting down the final seconds and as time ran out, he exclaimed, “Do you believe in miracles?” Miracles and belief just so happen to play a large part in the Christian Bible. The disciple Paul made a claim that the belief in the miracle of Jesus’ resurrection is sufficient for salvation. In other words, Paul believed that personal salvation was dependent solely upon faith, not on acting and doing good. As Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians, “Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.”<sup>35</sup> Along with this, Paul says in Ephesians, “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God. Not of work, lest any man should boast.”<sup>36</sup>

Belief along with faith are essential components not only for sports and religion but life in general. The book mentions that, “belief is what holds together the unfolding of events from the present to the future.”<sup>37</sup> It goes on that if the definition of belief is what we hold to be true without any evidence, then belief does not guarantee that what we believe is true. This ties into

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<sup>35</sup> Galatians 2:16 KJV

<sup>36</sup> Ephesians 2:8-9 KJV

<sup>37</sup> Scholes, Jeffrey., and Raphael Sassower. *Religion and Sports in American Culture*. Routledge, 2014, 24.

simple expectations such as hoping your flight landing safely and desiring a good grade on a test you studied for. Although you have no idea whether any of these would actually happen, you expect it to be based on starting your car or studying and getting a good grade in the past. If anything, belief is a concept of hope that allows people to look forward to and have hope for the future. The question becomes what differs between an athlete's belief in a comeback and a worshipper's belief in a higher being? Although there is a difference in the two, it is worth noting how the discussion of this characteristic within the two shows the overlap between sports and religion.

Because religion usually deals with views on gods, afterlife, and miracles, belief is very much required. Since these things are outside the five senses, belief is required in religions for reasons such as tradition, sacredness, and holy rules. Christians believe in the ten commandments and that Jesus died on the cross. The belief in the ten commandments is a belief in a set rules in which Christians follow to live holy lives. The belief in Jesus dying on the cross is a belief in which instills a duty for Christians to live a life for Jesus since he dies for their original sin. Hindus believe the prince Rama and an army of flying monkeys jumped over a whole ocean to save Rama's wife Sita in Lanka. Buddhist believe Siddharta Gautama left his luxurious life in the palace and saw four sights: a sick man, an old man, a dead man and a monk, leading him to ask, "Why must people suffer?" and "What is the cause of suffering?" Furthermore, creeds also profess belief, with creed deriving from the Latin word "credo" which means "I believe." Therefore, belief in all these religions entails strong trust in something without any actual evidence. It is this sense of "What if?" that makes belief in a religious sense so special and sacred.

Another way people express their belief within religion is by using the word, “faith.” Faith differs from belief in that it requires a special relationship with the divine. Faith really entails that one believes God truly exists and puts in trust, loves, and fears God. So, someone who is said to have faith in God really puts God in their lives instead of simply believing in him. For example, in the book of Genesis, God tempted Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac on top of a mountain. God simply told Abraham, “Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.”<sup>38</sup> In response, Abraham listened to God, brought his son to the mountain, and almost went through with killing his son. Even though God sent down an angel and stopped Abraham from killing his son, Abraham truly believed and cooperated with God wanting him to kill his own son. Abraham blindly listened to God which showed how his extreme faith led him to believe that God would not lead him down the wrong path. Another example in the scriptures is how Paul proclaims to those who did not experience the life of Jesus in that Jesus’ sacrifice is all that is needed to be put on good standing with the Lord. Again, he writes in Galatians, “... by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.”<sup>39</sup> Also, in the book of Hebrews, it states, “Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear.”<sup>40</sup> Considering these examples, it shows that a prior commitment to God is necessary for faith in order for these doubts to be overcome.

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<sup>38</sup> Genesis 22:2 KJV

<sup>39</sup> Galatians 2:16 KJV

<sup>40</sup> Hebrews 11:3 KJV



Religious belief, and or faith, both provide a crucial bridge to connect the person to the divine being. For religious thinkers, belief actually may act a better way of accessing the truth about the world instead of knowledge. Early Christian theologian Saint Augustine made faith to be the foundation for any understanding in the world. His stance on the relationship between God and reason can be shown through “Faith seeking understanding.” This is when faith is in place, reason is then used as a tool to discover God’s creations. Faith in a God who created the world must come before any actual understanding of it. If not, then, “the world we claim to understand has a shaky, misplaced, human center foundation.”<sup>41</sup>

Someone who had a different stance than Saint Augustine was Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas put faith and reason on the same level since both are gifts from God that gives us the ability to comprehend God’s creation. Aquinas claims, “Creation is both material and spiritual and is revealed to us by God.”<sup>42</sup> We have the ability to observe the world and use reason to determine that God must have created the universe because something cannot be created out of nothing. Reason, however, comes limited when talking about the Bible. Claims such as Jesus being the son of God are not accessible through observation or reason. For Aquinas, it is faith in God that confirms these claims. With all this said, faith and reason have separate duties yet have the same goal of understanding the ways in which God is revealed.

Belief in the sports world differs from belief in religion in that it has a hard time trying to fit into sports. For example, someone could believe that they are a really good basketball player, however you literally need to play and display your skills in order to back up this claim. Also, common sports fans always have arguments of who the greatest player of all time was for

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<sup>41</sup> Scholes, Sassower 26

<sup>42</sup> Scholes, Sassower 26

specific sports. Although so many people have so many different arguments, many of their beliefs are not true simply because the statistics do not prove them right. Athletes rely heavily on their belief in their ability in order to motivate them although they may or may not be wrong. Therefore, belief in sports is closely tied to performance which needs to be observed, unlike belief in religion.

As shown in chapter one, belief in sports was prevalent in the times of the Aztecs and Greek Olympics. Along with the sacrifice of the losing players in the Aztec ball game, Olympians in ancient Greece performed sacrifices of animals to please the gods and assure them victory. There were 69 altars in the sacred enclosure of the olympic games, but the altar of Zeus was the most important one. On the third day of the games a great sacrifice took place on this altar called a “hekatombe.” During this, one hundred oxen were killed in the presence of the olympic athletes. This served as the ultimate pre-games ceremony to receive a blessing from Zeus. These ritualistic beliefs have changed drastically for today's athletes in that their pre-game rituals tend not to involve a kind of practice. Modern day athletes see pre-game rituals in a less severe manner in that the rituals do not necessarily have a say in the outcome of the game. Despite this thought, many players display and rely on their faith through pre-game prayer with the thought that they will be kept safe throughout the course of the game. With this said, religious beliefs and rituals have often been seen kept to the player themselves in that they do not display the belief or ritual publicly. Hence, more beliefs in the sports world that are known are seen more as “superstitions.”

Superstitions are not seen in a religious light in that they can have little to no meaning to no one other than the player themselves. Most superstitions are usually not significant in that it

could be something as little as tying your left shoe first or making sure not to step on the foul-line before a baseball game. Although superstitions give off the comfort of a routine, they essentially have no real impact other than mentally hence creating a somewhat placebo effect if the player finds the superstition useful. Many consider Michael Jordan to be the greatest basketball player of all time. When he first joined the National Basketball Association in 1984, he wore shorts that were longer than most of the other players because he wore his game shorts from college underneath them. Along with this, tennis legend Serena Williams is known to only wear one pair of socks throughout the course of a tournament. Her mindset seems to be unsanitary but if it ain't broke don't fix it right? Although these superstitions seem insignificant and non-impacting on the game, they still hold meaning to the player which allows them to feel comfortable and play freely.

Along with the players, fans take part in the rituals as well. Rituals usually involve some kind of worship, and that is exactly what fans do with their teams. Just as a religious person has a certain time to pray, the fan has a certain day of the week in which they are dedicated to watch and support their team. It is popular for fans to go to the same restaurant or bar in their lucky jersey to root on their team. Also, fans at baseball games flip their baseball caps upside down if their team is losing to try to start a rally; these hats are referred to as "rally caps." Because fans do not really have a say in what happens in a sports game, there is definitely more of a spiritual connection in that they rely outside forces to control the game's outcome. A famous case of an outside force affecting a team was the "curse" on the Boston Red Sox baseball team. After winning five of the first fifteen World Series championships in baseball, the Red Sox traded their star player Babe Ruth to the New York Yankees in 1920. Since that move was made, the

Yankees went on to win twenty-seven World Series championships while the Red Sox went on a drought for eighty-six years. Since a team that dominant went without a World Series for that long, fans attributed the drought to the trade of Babe Ruth, otherwise known as, “The Curse of the Bambino.”

A superstition is a belief or practice that often rises from ignorance, a misunderstanding of science or causality, a belief in fate or magic, or fear of that which is unknown..<sup>43</sup> They give players and fans a sense of accomplishment in that they did something in order to gain good *karma* to accomplish the task at hand. Karma is the force generated by a person’s actions held in Hinduism and Buddhism to perpetuate transmigration and in its ethical consequences to determine the nature of the person’s next existence. Considering it is difficult to see whether rituals or superstitions actually have an impact on a player’s performance or the game, it is then also hard to determine the strength of the belief in the ritual or superstition. If someone was to ask Michael Jordan or Serena William if their superstitions actually have an influence on the way they play, they would most likely say no since they have incredible athletic ability which helps them win. Despite athletes having other things to do in a routine, such as watching film or working out, these rituals become a part of the athletes comfortable routine which allows the rituals to keep going.

So then the question becomes why continue to believe in these rituals knowing they do not actually help the probability of winning? The only answer is that there actually must be little belief in any of these rituals that they have some kind of force or impact on the way someone, or a team, will play. In a scientific sense, most of these beliefs and rituals are unjustifiable in that

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<sup>43</sup> Vyse, Stuart A., *Believing in Magic: The Psychology of Superstition*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 19–22

they lack evidence which deems them superstitious. However, beliefs that deem themselves successful over and over again present an argument of validity and may justify a means of influence beyond the individual athlete. In a similar sense, the amount of belief differs depending on the situation of an athlete's season. When it comes to believing in your team, every player before the season starts is optimistic and believes that they will have a good season. A player's belief in their chances of winning may increase if their team is in first place and winning every single game; however it could also decrease their amount of belief in they are having a terrible season. It goes to show that belief in sports is not so essential in that athletic talent and statistics hold the real value and truth in the minds of sports fans.

Religion and sports interact in that belief is present within them both. Although belief in religion is so much more apparent than belief in sports, sports beliefs are central and close to many different athletes and fans. Many beliefs and curses are deemed superstitious in the sports world and some believe they have nothing to do with religion. New York times columnist David Brooks said the following in one of his articles:

Ascent in the sports universe is a straight shot. You set your goal, and you climb toward greatness. But ascent in the religious universe often proceeds by a series of inversions: You have to be willing to lose yourself in order to find yourself; to gain everything you have to be willing to give up everything; the last shall be the first; it's not about you...Sports history is littered with odd quotations from

people who try to reconcile their love of sport with their religious creed- and fail.

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Brooks disagrees in that thought of sports and religion intertwining, however his reasoning is questionable. He seems to breeze by the sports goals by stating it is a “straight shot” while he deems a religious journey to be one sacrifice and triumph. As it will be shown in the next section, the journey to greatness for an athlete or team is most certainly one of sacrifice. Although belief in a religious sense is limited in the sports world, there are several instances of belief being displayed on a public sports stage, such as Jewish baseball player Sandy Kofax not pitching in the 1965 World Series because the game was during Yom Kippur. A modern day example which became quite controversial is the story of Tim Tebow, which will be discussed in chapter five. Despite the backlash, both religion and sports beliefs have a common function in, “transcend[ing] what is observed in order to access what is observed.”<sup>45</sup> Religious beliefs have been assumed to use the knowledge of the world in order to acquire truth while beliefs in sports rely on talent and the statistical numbers. Although people may believe that faith and belief is more prevalent in religion, there is certainty that once a team wins or loses in sports that there is absolutely no room for doubt.

## **Sacrifice**

When it comes to the concept of sacrifice, the first thing that pops into mind, for most people, is someone who has a duty or is honorable. Soldiers sacrifice their lives and time by leaving their families and going to fight in wars in order to protect and serve their country.

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<sup>44</sup> Brooks, David , “The Jeremy Lin Problem,” *The New York Times*, February 16, 2012.

<sup>45</sup> Scholes, Sassower 40

Mothers and fathers are seen as superheroes because they sacrifice their lives to raise their kids and make a better life for them. Even citizens sacrifice their hard-earned money in order to pay taxes to keep their country running. The common theme in all these cases is that one must give up something valuable or important to them in order to benefit in the future. Whether the one sacrificing benefits or whether something else benefits, if nothing valuable or cherished is given up then nothing is truly sacrificed.

This kind of sacrifice has always been present since the start of religion. Ever since people began to believe in gods and spirits, there have always been attempts to please these gods, mostly in the forms of sacrificial ceremonies. The sacrificed object had to be of value to the community for the gods to respond. As shown in chapter one, sacrifice was an essential part of the Aztec ball game in that they played the game to please the gods by sacrificing the losing players. The smoke that rose from the burning of the flesh was believed to enter the “nostrils” of the gods in which they received the sacrifice. If the relationship of the human and divine is broken, for example with a lack of sacrifices, the gods would respond with droughts and famines. To human sacrifices by the Aztecs to animal sacrifices in ancient Hindu times, sacrifice has always been a fundamental concept in religion.

Referring back to the story of Abraham and his son Isaac, many people now would find Abraham in the wrong for trying to sacrifice his only son. It must be noted, however, that the act of sacrificing an animal or, in some cases, a child in extreme circumstances was normal in the time of Abraham. God severely tested Abraham's faith, but Abraham passes his test and shows his willingness to sacrifice his one son. Rules are later addressed in terms of sacrifice in the bible. Leviticus states:

For the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul...

For it is the life of all flesh; the blood of it is for the life thereof: therefore I said unto the children of Israel, Ye shall eat the blood of no manner of flesh: for the life of all flesh is the blood thereof: whosoever eateth it shall be cut off.<sup>46</sup>

In these verses, God gives life through the blood that runs through the veins. Therefore, when you offer blood through a sacrificial ceremony, you are giving up another life to the gods in order to get something valuable in return. Reconciliation with God, otherwise known as atonement, is the main objective of sacrifices and the offering of blood from an animal is believed to have atonement of the human soul. This theme of atonement through sacrifice is central within Christianity. The early Christian Church believed that a permanent split from God happened when Adam and Eve disobeyed God by eating from the Garden of Eden. This is the reason why Christians believe we all have “Original Sin.” In 418 CE, St. Augustine convinced the Council of Carthage to reject the idea of “limbo” and that all unbaptized children live in happiness. According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, “St. Augustine and the African Fathers believed that unbaptized infants share in the common positive misery of the damned, and the very most that St. Augustine concedes is that their punishment is the mildest of all.” i.e. they go to Hell for eternal punishment, but are not as badly treated as other inmates.”<sup>47</sup> Augustine

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<sup>46</sup> Leviticus 17:11,14 KJV

<sup>47</sup> Toner, Patrick. “Limbo.” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 9. New York, Robert Appleton Company, 1910, [<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09256a.htm>].



believed that unbaptized infants share in the common positive misery of the damned, however their punishment would be mild.

Later Christians, however, believed that only a monumental sacrifice would be able to make up for the actions of Adam and Eve. Therefore, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ was the self-sacrifice that was established to make things right again. In this scenario, the father God gave up his son Jesus Christ in the form of a sacrifice, just like Abraham did to his only son Isaac. However, Jesus gave up his own life in order to free his people from Original Sin. In a letter that he wrote to the Romans, Paul writes, “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”<sup>48</sup> The significance of this sacrifice is that the Christian community does not have to sacrifice anything of their own; the benefits of the sacrifice were given through Jesus’ self-sacrifice.

The act of sacrifice seems to change from an external to internal event in that one honors God by sacrificing their own desires for the sake of others. One very extreme type of sacrifice is martyrdom. A martyr is a person who is killed because of their religious or other beliefs. This is a severe scenario which is not seen, or even suggested, in today's times. There is, however, an interesting discussion of athletes as martyrs in terms of injury and retirement; this will be discussed in chapter five.

Another common term used to describe such a sacrifice in Eastern and Western religions is asceticism. Asceticism is the practice of the denial of physical or psychological desires in order to attain a spiritual ideal or goal. This could be done through abstaining from food or by going on hiatus from a community. An example of severe fasting can be seen in Caroline

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<sup>48</sup> Romans 3:23-24 KJV

Bynum's book *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*.<sup>49</sup> In the book, Bynum talks about the relationship that medieval women, particularly holy medieval women, had with the consumption of food. She suggests that the idea of abstaining, or removing oneself from the needs of daily life was seen as particularly holy when taken on by women. Bynum also describes the term inedia, where female saints would refuse to eat anything but the Eucharist, surviving on Christ's flesh alone for years on end. These were various forms of sacrifice in which women abstained from food in order for a certain cause. This relationship with women's body to food and Christ is an interesting form of sacrifice in that women saw abstaining as a way of sanctity in the church.

Though central in religion, sacrifice has carried over into many aspects in the world, especially sports. Throughout the history of sacrifice, the aspect of giving up something of value in return for something of value has never changed. According to Scholes and Sassower, there are two forms of sacrifice when you are an athlete. The two types of sacrifice are "that which is done for personal gain and that which benefits a group, such as a team or even a nation."<sup>50</sup> Either way, sacrifice and hard work go together in order to develop the individual or a team to display their full potential.

On an individual level, there must be sacrifices made in order for an athlete to succeed. A great example of this is the day in the life of a college athlete. For most college teams, coaches require their players to wake up as early as five to six in the morning for team workouts. After that is over, students then go to class and then usually have another team practice after classes

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<sup>49</sup> Bynum, Caroline Walker. *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: the Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*. Univ. of California Press, 2010.

<sup>50</sup> Scholes, Sassower 46

are over. This leaves them little time throughout the day to catch up on schoolwork or even have free time to themselves. During the team season, you might have to take long travel trips in order to play opposing teams, which leads to student-athletes missing class and having to make up lots of work. With all these responsibilities as a student along with being a college athlete, many argue that there is a significant sacrifice in time and sleep in college athlete's lives. Along with a lack of free time and sleep, most athletes are restrained to a strict diet regime. This prevents many athletes from eating their favorite food due to nutritional value, restricting them to eat food that will only improve their body's health. To add on to the student athlete example, with the lack of time in between classes and for work and athletics, student athletes only have so much time to access only a certain amount of dining options on campus. On road trips, student-athletes are limited even more to their dining options due to no access to transportation for dining other than eating with the team. With college athletes having this disadvantage, as opposed to professional athletes who could hire a chef to make them custom meals according to their needs and liking, student-athletes sacrifice yet another huge aspect of their lives. With busy days, long travel periods, and strict diet regimes, it almost appears as if this process does not seem enjoyable at all. The payoff, however, is the satisfaction of playing the sport you love at a competitive level. Individual sacrifice is therefore important because those who are not willing to put the work in will not be as successful and not achieve their full potential.

Scholes and Sassower bring up a point of our society being one of "immediate gratification." With the process of being an athlete being one of long off-seasons and lots of non-game training, there is a need for patience in that the process involves "delayed gratification." This means that many athletes work hard in order to achieve something that will

happen in the future. With this mindset, however, many see this as a mindset in which you work hard for a future that is not certain. In other words, what if an athlete gets hurt in the off-season? What if all the hard work ends up not being worth it because that person did not make the team? What if there is no way for that person to make it to the next game because of transportation? These questions add a new element of individual sacrifice in that all the hard work is put towards an unseeable future. Although these are all possible risks, it shows the grit that is needed to be an athlete in that you truly have to pave a path to success and sacrifice things in order to create a future that is not guaranteed.

On a non-individual level, sacrifice for a team or group is a type of sacrifice on a very selfless level. In team sports, there are different roles in which players take to mesh and succeed. Although everyone wants to be the star player on the team, unfortunately that can not be the case. Playing a team sports requires someone who is ok with sharing playing time with other people along with accepting the fact that there may be better and more talented stars on your team.

An example of this type of role is the position of offensive linemen in football. In the National Football League, or NFL, the recognizable star players are all the skill-position players. They are the flashy wide-receivers and running backs that score all the points and wear all the cool gear. This gives them all the attention from the fans worldwide, hence elevating them to superstar status. The players on the field that do not get any of that attention, however, are the offensive linemen. While the skill player scores all the touchdowns, the offensive linemen block the player on the other team and try to prevent them from tackling their skill players. In other words, they are human shields for the skill players. Considering the linemen take a big blow of

physical wrath and wreckage, you would think they would be honored more. However, considering the only statistics and highlights plays come from scoring points, the linemen are simply left in the shadows without much recognition. The sacrifice of putting your body on the line for your teammates is the sacrifice that goes along with this position. There are many other roles in different sports that are similar such as setting picks for the scores in basketball or when a baseball player hits a sacrifice fly in order for his teammate to score. This “team based” form of sacrifice involves deprivation of one's own success for the sake of their team.

With this team sacrifice being displayed, it goes to say that the players usually putting in on the line for their team are not the superstar players. For the most part, superstar players will only truly sacrifice their playing abilities if the benefits are in their favor. In 2004, star basketball player Shaquille O’Neal denied a contract from the Los Angeles Lakers in which he offered him less money than his previous contract. Although it was known that he would have had great winning and championship success on the Lakers, O’Neal responded by saying, “I won’t be devalued. Never, ever devalued. I will never take less than what I am worth. I’m the one that’s bringing the payers in anyway. And I can bring in players for no money.” This goes to show that sacrifice also comes with a certain mentality. Superstars are less inclined to sacrifice more for their team because they do not necessarily have anything more to prove. Their talent is enough to please their team, therefore extended effort is not needed to prove their worth. Therefore, lower-tier players are more likely to make sacrifices for their team in order to make a name for themselves and raise their stock within their organization.

As shown, sacrifice has played a central role in religious history, establishing an official way in which the humans could please spirits in gods. However, in today’s time, sacrifice has

seemed to dwindle as a part of being religious. In the sacrifices of Abraham's son Isaac and Jesus, both examples were matters of life and death. This kind of religious life is not present anymore and would now be considered martyrdom. It seems that sacrifice has taken a shift from playing a central role in religion to more of a central role in sports. Other than abstaining from meat during lent and fasting in other religions, there is not much of an idea of sacrifice when it comes to religion nowadays. It seems that the verbal usage and conveying the truths about religion is what people are concerned with, not the actual physical torment to display their faith.

Despite this, it seems as if athletes are becoming more wired to make sacrifices to their bodies in order to benefit personally or on a team level. Hockey players are more inclined to fight another player to defend a teammate rather than a parishioner putting their body through torment to display their faith. To add on, athletes are more inclined to success by making sacrifices, as opposed to people of faith that simply have to attend services without much physical resentment. Considering Sundays have been taken over by sporting events, maybe church-goers feel they are making a sacrifice by taking time to go to religious service? With this said, parishioners are asked to do a lot less for their faith in today's time so that parishioners do not see that living for their faith is a burden.

The commonality between sacrifice in sports and religion is the severity in which the two institutions refer to sacrifice. Both sports and religion try to prove and promote sacrifice without dire consequences such as sacrificing one's life. In other words, religion and sports need the concept of sacrifice in order to convey certain meanings and lessons, without actually making the ultimate sacrifice. Therefore, religion and sports use the concept of sacrifice in the same type of way. Because athletes and religious figures use the idea of sacrifice in a similar way, they both

commit to this concept of sacrifice either for their group or team, as well as for their individual self. Considering sports have taken modern day culture by storm, it is more likely that the concept of sacrifice will be most visibly shown by athletes in which the concept will then carry over to the fans. Despite the athlete being able to display sacrifice to a grand audience due to media exposure, the self-sacrifice of Jesus seems to be the building block example of sacrifice. Considering what athletes do in order to succeed, you cannot help to think that Jesus could act as a role model in the light of sacrifice. With the sacrifice of a diet, sleep, and physical torment, athletes must look to someone who has prevailed through sacrifice in order to keep pushing. If there was not a religious history of sacrifice being worth it in the end, it would be probable that most athletes would not go through or deal with the sacrifices that come with success. It is in this sense in which as much as religion impacts the language in sports, athletics teach us as well about sacrifice for yourself or the community.

## **Competition**

The characteristic of competition is interesting in that there is not a universal perception of it. Competition arises whenever at least two parties strive for a goal which cannot be shared: where one's gain is the other's loss.<sup>51</sup> Although some may feel competition keeps the spirit and intensity up, competition sometimes gets a bad reputation. Competition can sometimes be thought of as selfish and damaging to social construct in that it forces the individual to worry

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<sup>51</sup>Smith, K. G., Ferrier, W. J., & Ndofor, H. "Competitive Dynamics Research. *The Blackwell Handbook of Strategic Management*, 2001, [<http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.598.7563&rep=rep1&type=pdf>]

about no one else but themselves to achieve a competitive task. While cooperation is appreciated within the sports and religious community, it requires, in most cases, the elimination of others so one can succeed. Along with this, competition can be seen negatively in that people can take it way too far. In sports, there are always the overly-competitive parents who try to promote their children's athletic abilities and try to coach their kid from the fan section. Although trying to give their child the advantage, they are simply seen as a nuisance. In politics, there are many times where candidates will bring up facts about each other to try to demote their opponents credibility. Although some of the facts could bring up some personal information, candidates usually do whatever it takes to get an edge on their opponent.

French theological thinker Rene Girard addresses the issue of competition through his "Mimetic Theory." Girard realized that human desire is not a linear process where a person freely desires a certain object or thing. Instead, we have a desire for certain things because of others. We rely on other people to determine what we want because other people determine what is prevalent and determine the standard on what people should want or have. However, this becomes a problem in that there becomes a conflict for certain desires based on limited resource making rivals between parties.

Mimetic desire operates as a subconscious imitation of another's desire. This same type of unconscious pull explains both aspects of rivalry and friendship. According to Girard, imitation is inescapable. In an article with Business Insider, Paypal co-founder Peter Thiel describes Girard's philosophy saying, "The reason we do what we do just because other people are doing it, too. That's why we end up competing for the same things: the same schools, the same jobs, the same markets... People will compete fiercely for things that don't matter, and



once they're fighting they'll fight harder and harder. You might not be able to escape imitation entirely, but if you're sensitive to the way it drives us then you're already ahead of most.”<sup>52</sup>

Girard also describes the “mimetic rivalry” to highlight the movement from a model-subject to a model-obstacle relationship. This happens, for example, when a student is learning from a teacher and then gradually becomes smarter than the teacher, therefore starting a competitive rivalry between the two. This occurs when there is desire for an object that cannot be shared such as a job or achievement of some sort.

Although competition can be taken too far, it ends up being an essential part of life in that it keeps things flowing and away from plateauing. In other words, competition keeps the human race from remaining unproductive by forcing others to compete and progress forward. The reason the pizza place down the street uses the freshest ingredients is because their rival shop does not, so they want to be better than them. Considering that the top five percent of a law school class gets a good job out of school, law students compete with each other to try to get the best grade possible for a successful future. Lastly, on the simplets of levels, it is Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution in which living organisms develop through natural selection in order to survive and compete. With that said, due to the scarcity of the resources that planet earth has to offer, competition amongst these resources is necessary.

Competition is also a social act. Competitions that involve more than one person allows a group to bond and compete together. Team obstacle courses require participants to trust their teammates and support them to try to finish the course before another team does. Through

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<sup>52</sup> Feloni, Richard. “Peter Thiel Explains How an Esoteric Philosophy Book Shaped His Worldview.” *Business Insider*, Business Insider, November 10, 2014, [www.businessinsider.com/peter-thiel-on-rene-girards-influence-2014-11].

struggling and competing together, teammates bond over the similar struggles hence making competition actually sociable. Another benefit of competition is that it always motivates others to improve and try harder. In sports, the competition between athletes makes them train harder to try to be better than one another, which improves the quality and athletic talent in the game itself making it more entertaining. In terms of the market, Scholes and Sassower provide an example of the American auto industry. They state that, “the American auto industry on the whole has made significant improvements in the quality of its automobiles over the last several years in part because of competition between companies even when some companies are losing.”<sup>53</sup> Therefore, although there may be competition within the different car companies, society benefits because of the great quality cars that are being produced. This goes to show that competition is very active within society and especially in the sports world. However, these qualities of competition raise the question on how it pertains in the religious world?

When it comes to religion, competition is not the first thing that comes to mind. In such cases as Buddhist practicing the path to enlightenment and Catholic’s going to reconciliation, most religions put an emphasis on the individual; hence not having competition with others come into play. Also, as mentioned previously, competition often arises when resources are scarce and limited. Religious beliefs are infinite in that there will never be a scarcity in belief in God or any other religious beliefs making it everlasting. Lastly, the concept of winning and losing does not seem to fit within religion in that the central purpose of religion is to unite a community by common beliefs.

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<sup>53</sup> Scholes, Sassower 98

There has been a history of competition in religion, especially in the Bible. The story of Cain and Abel, which is believed to be the first murder ever committed, stems off the concept of competition. When Cain and Abel both presented God with offerings, God only accepted the offering from Abel and not Cain. This made Cain rather envious and as a result he murdered Abel in a field. When asked by God what happened to his brother, Cain responded, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”<sup>54</sup> With this response, it is apparent that Cain’s competitive side took over when it came to the scarcity of God’s approval. Although thinking that getting rid of Abel would give him God’s approval, Cain is then punished by God and has to walk the earth for his remaining days.

Another similar story with a sibling relationship is between the twin son’s Jacob and Esau. Isaac was their father and was to give their first born son, Esau, a sacred blessing. However, when Esau goes out to hunt and bring his father Isaac a meal, Jacob disguises himself as his brother and delivers Isaac the meal, receiving his blessing. Esau becomes mad about his brother deceiving his father and then pleads, “Hast thou but one blessing, my father? bless me, even me also, O my father.”<sup>55</sup> The fact that Isaac only had one blessing to give shows how limited the resources were for the two brothers. To add that Jacob deceitfully received the blessing without being punished must add to the anger that Esau gained toward him. This type of “by whatever means” competition can be seen in the sports world as well, through cheating and scandals which will be discussed later on. It goes to show that competition can lead to immoral actions which may benefit one person but could leave another in the dust, thus arising the issue of fairness.

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<sup>54</sup> Genesis 4:9 KJV

<sup>55</sup> Genesis 27:38 KJV

In the New Testament, Jesus tells an interesting parable in which fairness does not seem to be present. In the gospel of Matthew, there is a parable about vineyard laborers that arrive at work at various times. Some workers show in the morning, some in the middle of the day, and some when there is only one hour of sunlight left. Despite the drastic difference in hours worked, the boss still pays them all the same wage. The morning workers then get angry in that they worked the longest so they did not think it was fair for them to all be paid equally. Instead of the workers being unified, this then set up a competition in that there was a lack of fairness in the wages. The boss then responds to them all saying, “Take that thine is, and go thy way: I will give unto this last, even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good? So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen.”<sup>56</sup> This is an interesting parable in that it downplays competition in an odd way. Although technically it is not fair that the late workers got equal pay, the emphasis was that each work got a fair day's pay which was supposed to promote cooperation. It can be seen as fair to give them all the same wage however the thought of not working equal hours still remains skeptical.

Although Jesus downplays competition in that parable, he then seems to promote it in the gospel of Matthew. He states:

Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother

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<sup>56</sup> Matthew 20:14-16 KJV

more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me. He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it.<sup>57</sup>

This passage is interesting in that Jesus seems to be setting up a competition regarding himself which seemingly is unlike what he preaches. He opens with the threat of bringing a sword instead of peace. He then threatens that anyone who loves his father and mother more than Jesus is not worthy of him. Jesus seems to be threatening people into following him over their own family which seems a little harsh. Here, Jesus really brings out the competition in that he wants people to follow him and no one else.

With competition being present through religious history, it seems that competition is present only when there is a scarcity of resources that benefits an individual. With this said, the concept of salvation seems unlimited yet must be earned. Christians believe that before you enter heaven or hell, your soul will be judged by God on “Judgement Day.” It is said that God on this day distinguishes the sheep from the goats. This means that there is a group of souls that would not be allowed to heaven, hence making a means of competition between two separate groups. Although heaven is not limited, the entrance and means to get there limits certain soul entries, which make people try to be the best Christians they can be in order to achieve their right to heaven. So, although it is tough to find, these examples prove that even in religion there can be winners and losers through competitive acts.

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<sup>57</sup> Matthew 10:34-39 KJV

While you have to look closely to find a sense of competition in religion, sports has competition front and center as its lead role. This characteristic is so essential in sports because without competition, sports would simply be pointless. If there is no sense of competition, then there is no will to win, hence making the game less intense and not worth watching. If cooperation was replaced by competition, then there would be no rivalries and everyone would just help each other win. Considering that this is outrageous to even think about, it goes to show that sports are nothing without competition. Both teams in a game want to win, so there must be winners and losers or else competition is useless.

On the idea of cooperation, there has been an upward trend in sports of decreasing the amount of competition, especially with youth sports. There is a fear that competition within youth sports would not allow children to develop into cooperative adults. Also, there is a notion that too much losing for a child could mess with their well-being mentally. Instead of championship trophies, you now see that many teams hand out “participation” trophies to every team. Although teaching cooperation to kids is a good thing, it does not prepare kids for a time where they will fail in life. Sports are great for shaping a child’s attitude and personality in that it teaches them the ups and downs in life from winning and losing. Practicing also instills a work-ethic and routine within them that they can carry on in their lives as they get older. Therefore, removing the aspect of competition from youth sports actually has no long-term benefit for the kids. Because competition against an opposing player or team is essential in sports, removing competition from it will deem the activity to sport at all.

Competition is such an essential part of sports that it does not have to pertain to another competitor. For the non-team sports, such as golf and track, there is a competition within the

athletes self every single day. A golfer is constantly in competition with his best score, always trying to find a way to get one less stroke on a hole. The marathon or track runner is always in competition with their fastest time and always strives to beat that time by any means. This type of self-competition serves as motivation for these individuals in that they do not have the teammates there to motivate and cheer them on. Sports involving teammates, however, have a fine line between cooperation and competition. In terms of cooperation, teammates have to support each other on and off the field and try to be the best teammate they can be. On the other hand, there had to be a sense of competition between teammates in order to have the starting position and to play the most you could over other teammates. This distinction requires a certain maturity out of players to want your teammates to succeed while also having a sense of self-confidence to succeed as well.

Considering competition is pretty much infinite within sports, there is still a reality that if you're not a winner then you are a loser. Many athletes do not find being a loser acceptable by any means. Therefore, they are willing to win by any means. Sometimes, however, athletes do not follow the rules in sports in order to get a competitive edge over an opponent. In sports, the mental aspect of the game is a huge component. With this said, there is often a scene of "trash talking" between players in today's games. During a football game after the play is over, you often see opposing players get into each other's faces and try to get in their opponents head. Although not technically illegal in sports, trash talking is frowned upon in that it takes away from sportsmanship and being a good moral athlete. However, despite it being unsportsmanlike, it can serve as a distraction for opponents hence propelling the trash talkers to an advantage. Along with verbal distraction, there are also ways players cheat physically. In basketball, it is

common to get away with jersey tugging in order for the opponent to not be able to jump. Also, it is common for soccer players to get away with illegal fouls that are not called. It is with these cheap plays in which players try to get an edge during the game.

There are some cases in sports, however, where competition turns into cheating and then cheating turns into breaking the law. One of the most recent cheating scandals that has been brought to the public's attention is the Houston Astros scandal. In 2017, the Houston Astros won the World Series against the Los Angeles Dodgers. This was a historic moment in baseball in that the Astros years before were one of the worst teams in the league. They built their team off their draft picks and developed into one of the best baseball teams of all time. Although it has been two years since they won the World Series, there was always speculation of the Astros cheating by stealing other teams' signs. After an investigation by the MLB, they found evidence of the Astros stealing other teams' signs and using them to their advantage. There was video found of consistent trash can bang, which served as a morse-code type of system to relay the type of pitch to the Astro batters. More videos surfaced of all the Astros hitter having a mysterious bump on their right shoulder, which was suspected to be buzzers. After hitting a game winning home run, Astros star player Jose Altuve was seen running with his hands over his jersey and then telling his players, "Do not rip off my jersey." With all this evidence that came public, there was much criticism against the Astros for cheating and lying about it. Many professional players have spoken out against the Astors claiming they are ruining the integrity of the game, even threatening that they will throw at the Astros players when they step up to bat. The Astros took extraordinary steps in order to gain a competitive edge over other teams and it ended up not working out for them. Now with such a big radar on the Astros for the 2020 baseball season,



they have plummeted from being at the top of the top to one of the least respected teams to ever exist.

On an individual level, one of the most typical types of way players try to gain an edge is from performance enhancing drugs. For most athletes, the recipe for success is talent and hard work. However, there have been many cases where famous athletes tried to skip the hard work step by taking performance enhancing drugs. These allow players to recover faster and get stronger in a short amount of time, allowing peak physical and athletic performance as well. Despite these drugs being illegal amongst all professional sports leagues, athletes still try to test the system in order to make them one of the best. When an athlete uses steroids, it brings about many questions of the fairness of the sport and what kind of punishment the athlete really deserves. Lance Armstrong is often deemed the best cyclist of all time considering he won seven Tour de France competitions. However he was stripped of all his wins due to him being caught using performance enhancing drugs. In 2007, Barry Bonds broke the career home run leader in baseball making him the greatest power hitter of all time. However, later that season, an investigation found the Bonds was using steroids, resulting in Bond retirement later that season. In both of these cases, both athletes were in the wrong for using illegal substances. However, Bonds was not stripped of his record while Armstrong was forced to let go over all seven of his championships. This raises the question of proper punishment for these types of cases and to determine whether the athlete is actually deserving of any accolade that he or she earns. With the use of illegal substances, this question becomes harder to answer due to the aspect of fairness meaning that athletes use natural means of performance enhancement. Although these athletes

did physically set these records and earn them, they did it by an illegal means which cannot be allowed.

The next question is how far is too far when it comes to a competitive edge? Is it worth risking your own career in order to succeed on the playing field? More importantly, is it worth risking your reputation as a role model and professional athlete? Other than Barry Bonds, other big named baseball superstars caught using steroids are Mark McGwire, Alex Rodriguez and David Ortiz. Once again, all of these guys were some of the best baseball players to play, before even using steroids. They were at the top and still decided to use steroids in order to take their game and strength to the next level. Considering all of them got caught, they're reputations were as baseball greats shifted to their greatness being due to their steroid use hence calling them cheaters. They were also taunted, as Alex Rodriguez's nickname "A-rod" soon comically shifted to "A-roid." Considering these athletes were on the top of their game, does this then bring up the question of the pressure of losing propels players to take whatever means necessary of winning? Or is it a feeling of normality in today's game when it comes to cheating, considering the numerous cases of scandals there are in sports today? Even with all the accolades, something drove these players to take illegal measures in order to take their games for excellent to even more excellent. With that said, as hard as it is to remove the competition out of sports, it is equally as tough to remove the aspect of cheating in that it is another means in which athletes can succeed and win. The gospel of Matthew asks us, "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?"<sup>58</sup> Is this true? Or is competition so deeply woven into sports that winning at any cost will be acceptable?

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<sup>58</sup> Matthew 16:26 KJV

With all these different types of competition within religion and sports, Scholes and Sassower suggest that, "... religion has no choice to be immersed in our capitalist consumer culture."<sup>59</sup> Although religion and sports are seen as two very different establishments, both of them are open to anyone and can be accessed worldwide. Religion and sports are not competitive within each other in that one does not replace the other and you can do both simultaneously. Although in the preface there was a notion made of sundays mass being replaced by sunday football, the reality is you could go to mass in the morning and then watch the game later in the afternoon. Both religion and sports could draw from the same crowd as well making its participation equal and non-competitive as well.

Both sport and religion are successful industries in that they have a mass audience. When it comes to competition, sports is seen to be fully immersed in it while religion is seen to fend it off. It is thought by many that religion is a place of sacredness and holiness that promotes a cooperative environment in which everyone could pray and share their beliefs together. This is not realistic in that the competitive forces between and within religion drive certain faiths to display more of a uniqueness in order to make themselves different from other religions. It is with this competitive spirit for why there are so many different religions. For example, Martin Luther's competitive drive against papal authority and Catholic sale of indulgences led him to split from the Catholic church and start Protestant Reformation. This competition between religions allows for uniqueness in many different faiths.

Another key point to take into account is that while clear in the sports industry, religion as well requires to have successful business numbers. With a modern day culture of consumers,

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<sup>59</sup> Scholes, Sassower 112

people are always competing in marketing their products against their rivals and even other industries to gain more attention. In sports we see this through the large scale broadcast of events, billboards, merchandise, social media, and television programming. Sports arenas and stadiums are filled with advertisements boards lineup all around the walls. It is with this culture in which you have to use sight or words to catch a person's attention is the new and improved marketing method. With this being the clear strategy in sports, religion is actually starting to take part in this consumer culture. Just as you can live stream or watch a game on television, sermons are now being broadcasted the same way. Just as millions tune in to watch the NFL draft, millions also tune in to watch the selection of the new pope. Even on another note, athletes all the time end up in the news whenever they get arrested or in trouble with something. Similarly, we hear and read stories from the news about pastors getting in trouble, for example with priests getting in trouble for sexually harassing children. Although many see sports and religion in a different light, both establishments have a form of internal competition within themselves and are using the same strategies in order to market their industry. Both places are equally accessible through media and television. This equalness of exposure does not necessarily bring out the sacred and holy within religion in that sports are not looked at in that similar manner. However putting these two on this equal level really shows that neither sports nor religion are superior to each other.

### **Chapter 4: Ritual Behavior**

The previous chapter outlines three characteristics that are heavily involved in both sports and religion. All three of those characteristics can be expressed both in religion and sports by various means. You can display your belief in something through religious prayer or simply by claiming it out loud. Sacrifice is shown by inconveniencing yourself for the sake of others or a greater cause. In a religious sense, one can do this by giving up material goods and possessions on earth in order to please a certain god or deity. In sports, sacrifice can be taken on in several forms such as giving up certain things in order for training and playing for your teammates instead of yourself. The way to display a competitive side is through one's grit and taking chances needed to be able to succeed. Although different characteristics, they all share the fact that each of these acts is displayed by a certain type of behavior or action. All of these characteristics require an individual to act in a way which is different from their routine life in order to display a certain concept that they believe in. Also, the knowledge to perform these certain actions in certain situations must have to do with a past experience in which someone has learned or repeatedly performed these actions. Whether it is praying everyday or waking up every morning to practice, certain types of acts become rituals which translates into a certain routine. These rituals become so natural to people that it becomes a part of their lifestyle. There is a significance in the reason why we do things and doing them repeatedly makes the act even more significant in certain cases. The concept of ritual behavior is present both in sports and religion in that participants do things daily and routinely in which give importance and structure to certain individuals.

British anthropologist Victor Turner discusses the idea of ritual in religion in his book, *The Ritual Process*. Turner studied anthropology at University College of London after reading books on World War I. While at school, he developed a fascination for tribal life realizing that it was even more down-to-earth than that of the British soldier which he had experienced during the war. In the book, Turner defines rituals as, “prescribed formal behavior for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings and powers.”<sup>60</sup> The term, “technological routine” refers to the means by which a social group provides for its material needs. This is an interesting point by Turner in that this definition refers to rituals being outside this “technological routine” meaning that everyday rituals, such as eating and bathing, do not count. This therefore makes it seem as if celebration and festivals are the only time of rituals in which Turner deems acceptable. This lack of context for the definition makes it so something that does not necessarily benefit means of life is not a ritual.

The definition elaborates that rituals have a reference to belief in mystical beings and powers. However, not all rituals are religious at all and could just be silly things that an individual does that has significance to them. Also, some religions have no reference to mystical beings. Lastly, although individuals may be required to participate in a ritual, that doesn't mean that they necessarily believe in what the ritual stands for. For example, it is a ritual before every professional sporting event in America that the players and fans rise for the playing of the National Anthem. Although this is a ritual in sports in that it is done every time, not all players necessarily agree with it.

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<sup>60</sup> Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process*. Routledge & Paul, 1970.

In 2016, San Francisco 49er's quarterback Colin Kaepernick took a knee during the National Anthem because of the racism and police brutality happening during the time. This gained worldwide attention resulting in Kaepernick being dropped by the 49er's. Despite such a peaceful way of protesting a serious issue in his country, many people found Kaepernick's kneeling offensive in that people saw his actions as disrespecting his country. The action itself had no true significance, and Kaepernick was even open after the game telling the press it was to stand up for social injustice. Since then, no NFL team has signed Kaepernick despite being one of the top quarterbacks in the league. It is for these reasons in which Turner's definition of ritual must be refined.

Rituals are grounded in personal habits and are expressive and process-oriented. Religious beliefs and rituals are unique because people connect them with a sacred and supernatural realm and accept this connection of faith, which is the foundation for all religions and religious beliefs. Players converging and praying or performing some rituals before the start of a game is not an unusual or uncommon sight in today's sporting competitions. Things players often pray for is protection from injury during their competitions and to keep everyone safe. Athletes frequently use rituals to make them feel as if they have some control over what happens to them. The use of rituals among athletes has become so apparent that it is becoming noticed by spectators. Moreover, ritual and ceremony whether in religion or sport, reinforce values and beliefs. Religious beliefs and rituals can provide athletes with physical and spiritual reinforcement, help them concentrate, and face competition with confidence. Athletes are becoming more expressive in their religious belief, writing bible verses of their athletic tape and eyblack. Another form of ritual in sports is prayer. Many athletes pray after scoring points in

sports and all with their teammates before games. Not all religious athletes' use their beliefs in this manner, but there is a tendency for some to call on their religion to help them successfully face challenges and uncertainty. Even though religion and sports have exhibited some form of social co-existence in many societies, it has not been without social inhibitions in other societies.

Sport and religion have often been used to create strong values and connections amongst communities through rituals and public events. Sports have games and contests to celebrate competition, hard work, and achievement, while religions have ceremonies and rituals to celebrate commitment, community, and redemption. A commonality between sports and religions is that they both have rituals before, during, and after major events. Sports rituals include the singing of the national anthems, halftime shows, and shaking the other team's hand after the game. Religious rituals have baptisms, meditation, bar-mitzvahs, and the hajj to Mecca. With such a variety of different rituals and ceremonies in sports and religion, it is important to note when and why certain ceremonies are performed.

Different types of rituals and worship take place at different times during the year. The religious calendar is thus of great importance for rituals, since communities perform rituals based on events during that time of year. The beginning of the year, of the new moon, or of the week is viewed as an especially auspicious time for acts of worship and ritual. In communities with a specific daily structure for worship, the day is divided into different times for worship. Days that commemorate the birth or death of the founder of the religion are common like Christmas celebrating the birth of Jesus and Easter celebrating the death and resurrection of Jesus. There are also special Commemorations of the lives of the saints where people commonly recite special prayers and acts of devotion in their honor in a process called "veneration."



Another way in which certain people or events could be celebrated is through festivals and celebrations. Festivals are an expressive way to celebrate heritage, culture and traditions. The purpose of festivals is that they are meant to bring about special moments and emotions with loved ones. They play an important role in adding structure socially to our lives. Festivals could also serve as a distraction from our day to day routine of life, and give us some inspiration to remember the important things. They are something in which people can look forward to and develop excitement over engaging with their community. All festivals are also very cultural. There are several types of cultural festivals including National, Religious and Seasonal. They all serve the purpose of bringing happiness and strength to a community.

National festivals and celebrations serve to simply connect the people of a certain nation. National festivals connect citizens to important moments of a nation's history such as a day of independence or a day the nation was founded. With many nations that experience uprising between citizens and their own government, these types of holidays allow citizens to show their true patriotism for their nation and support their fellow citizens.

Another type of festival and celebration are religious ones. These types of festivals are important to families in that religious festivals often involve an individual's next step in their faith. For example, when someone receives first communion, you become united with Jesus Christ as he literally becomes part of you. The purpose of these different types of steps in faith is to help us to teach principles and ethics to our next generations. Also, by taking Holy Communion, you express your union with all Catholics who believe the same doctrines. These different religious festivals bring the same message of love, tolerance and understanding. During

these celebrations, people express their gratitude to God, for the special thing or event that originated on this particular festival.

Lastly, seasonal festivals reflect the attitude of people towards nature. These festivals are important because they are related to food supply. An example of a Seasonal festival is the “Mid-Autumn Festival”. This is one of the most-important traditional holidays in China, Taiwan, and Vietnam and is also the celebration of the harvest. It is also known as the Moon Festival because it coincides with the full moon on the 15th day of the eighth lunar month. Therefore, special desserts called “mooncakes” are made for the festival. Ceremonies are held both to give thanks for the harvest and to encourage a successful harvest again in the coming year. This happens from September to October and is a time of family gatherings, matchmaking, and public celebrations.

The fact that a certain ritual is held on a specific day is what keeps that ritual sacred and holy. In his article on worship, Walter Harrelson describes that, “On New Year’s Day in many ancient societies and in some contemporary communities, the act of worship is viewed as actually recreating the cosmos itself. Through the recitation of the myth of the world’s creation, the worshippers are drawn back into primordial time, to the fount of natural and historical existence, and participate in the renewal of the world order. In the ancient Middle East, such celebrations were of fundamental significance for society.”<sup>61</sup> The example he gives is of the Babylonian festival called the “Akitu festival.” This festival happened during spring time because it is the birth of nature, the reestablishment of the kingship by divine authority, and the

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<sup>61</sup>Harrelson, Walter. “Times and Places of Worship.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc. 2012, [www.britannica.com/topic/worship/Times-and-places-of-worship#ref66228].

securing of the life and destiny of the people for the coming year. Harrelson goes on to describe how ancient Israelite festivities were originally nature festivals but then came to be tied with historical events in the community. He describes:

The barley harvest in the early spring was related to the deliverance (the Passover) of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. The wheat harvest (Pentecost, or the Feast of the Weeks), about seven weeks later, commemorated the giving of the divine Law (the Ten Commandments) at Mount Sinai. The celebration of the harvest of summer fruits and the olives in early fall (Sukkoth, or Feast of Tabernacles) was associated with the period of wanderings in the wilderness prior to the entrance of the Israelites into the Promised Land (Canaan, or Palestine).<sup>62</sup>

These different rituals resulted in a community performing rituals that were tied to historical events. With this type of worship, the community is able to come together at a certain time in order to comply with the moral demands of a higher being.

In sports, the timing of certain rituals are essential in how an athlete prepares. For most athletes, rituals transform into routines which become a daily procedure for success. On practice and training days, athletes wear certain clothes, eat certain foods, and do certain things to get them better for that day. Although this may be seen as a routine, it becomes a ritual in that it is a sacred procedure in which allows for the athlete to only progress and achieve certain goals; in other words rituals can become a recipe for success. During practices, most teams or individuals have a stretch routine in order to get players warmed up for competition. Just as certain cultural

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<sup>62</sup> Harrelson 2012

rituals involve certain dance moves and routines, athletes become masters of certain stretches and warm ups that become second nature to them. For game days, there are many rituals both on and off the field. Fans have the ritual of showing up before the game starts to tailgate. Players have game day rituals that are done before every game to ensure success. The times in which players eat, stretch and prepare are important in that athletes have to make sure their bodies are prepared physically and mentally for games.

Festival wise, sports is probably the mecca of team and individual celebration. Most sports celebrations stem off winning, more specifically winning championships. After a team wins the MLB wins the World Series, the locker rooms become fully covered in tarps in order for players to celebrate by spraying each other with champagne. In car racing, after a driver wins the Indianapolis 500, it is tradition for the driver and his crews to kiss the finish line and drink a bottle of milk. These rituals for championships come along with giant parades in which teams are driven around their home city in front of millions of fans screaming and celebrating with them. With the exposure that comes from professional championships, there are no championship weeks in which fans and media participate in certain activities leading up to the game such as fun games, cookouts and media days.

Different types of rituals and worship also have respective places in which the activity is supposed to be done. A place of worship becomes sacred and holy by a significant act for a community taking place there. Sacred places were also sites of natural and historical significance for the community such as rivers and mountains. Mountains were of particular importance, since they were thought to bring the worshipper closer to heaven. Places of worship become near and dear to people, in that it becomes a place where holiness is present. Some religions have a sacred

place in which constitutes their religion to be connected between the supernatural and earth. For example, the Ka'bah is a building at the center of Islam's most important mosque, Great Mosque of Mecca and is considered by Muslims to be the "House of God." When it is time for Muslims to pray, they must determine the direction of the Ka'bah in order to pray facing its direction. Considering the sanctity of these holy places need to be conserved, guards and officials are sometimes appointed to protect these sacred places.

There are different types of places that are deemed acceptable for worship. The reason shrines, temples, and mosques are built is to commemorate a particular event of an individual leader of the community. Certain places also become holy due to association with a community leader or figure. Continuing with the example of Islam, every year millions of Muslims embark on a journey to Mecca, called the Hajj. The pilgrimage is meant to promote unity among followers of Islam. It is so central to Islam that one of the religion's Five Pillars is for every adult able to carry out the Hajj at least once in their lifetime. Mecca is where Muhammad, the prophet who founded Islam, was born, and where he received the first revelation of the Qur'an.

Major religions for the most part all have a place of established worship. Temples, mosques, and churches were made through the means of high regarded powers such as kings, merchants, bankers, or religious leaders. According to the Hebrew Bible, Solomon's Temple, was the first temple the Israelites built for God. It was also called the first temple and was first built by Solomon in Jerusalem. There are now standard Architectural patterns established, within mosques, churches, or temples and all three of these can be identified based on the architecture. With a sacred place to worship and perform rituals at sacred times, a set structure comes into play for people in that a routine is put together for them. The bad thing about this routinely

aspect is that the ritual may lose the spontaneity of the act or the aspect of fresh perspective. According to Harrelson, “Orderly and timely worship... provides an established mode of approaching God that can evoke from worshippers genuine spontaneity while offering a setting that is rich in aesthetic and intellectual, as well as spiritual, powers.”<sup>63</sup>

Setting in sports has a big part in the nostalgia and excitement that come with sports. One of the best parts of being on a team is that you get to travel to different stadiums, ballparks, and cities to play other opponents. This leads to experience such as visiting different landmarks, staying in a hotel, and playing in a different setting other than your home field. It is this aspect in which athletes get to experience playing the game they love in a different setting that may or may not be familiar to them. Considering that teams and individuals practice most likely in the same facility each time, playing somewhere else is exciting in that athletes get to prove their skills in front of different crowds while also dealing with adversity, therefore making them a better player.

So what is the significance of doing something repetitively in a routine like fashion? Do athletes believe the rituals that have no direct impact in the game actually make a difference in their playing ability? Do Christians truly believe that going to church every Sunday and going to confession will make them better Christians? Actions done in a ritualistic manner may sometimes be subconscious, yet they are so important to people that rituals become a part of how they function. When someone misses or forgets to do something they usually do, they don't feel right on the inside and feel like they are missing something. The fact that a ritual becomes so close to someone is great in that their rituals make them very invested in what they are doing

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<sup>63</sup> Harrelson 2012

whether it's preparing for a game or going to mass. Going off the aspect of competition, the will to be able to maintain rituals at designated time spots becomes a competition within oneself in that you could become guilty if you don't complete the ritual. Considering rituals could pertain to this aspect of competition and guilt, it goes to show how much they could take part in someone's life therefore making them very significant.

### **Chapter 5: Is Sports a Modern Day Religion?**

Although evolved as two institutions, the similarities between sports religions seem to be endless. Like religion, sports have gained a following which is insurmountable in relation to other establishments such as music, art and religion. Due to such easy access to sports whether it be through technology, buying merchandise, or simply playing the game ourselves, it is safe to say that sports have become a key part and inspiration in millions of peoples lives. Considering the following along with the role and effect that sports has in people's lives brings up the question of whether sports can be deemed a religion itself?

Considering the previous chapters, there are so many commonalities and characteristics between sports and that is most noticeably recognized between the two establishments. This claim can be supported by Daniel Wann, a sports psychologist at Murray State University, who states that, “The similarities between sport fandom and organized religion are striking. Consider the vocabulary associated with both: faith, devotion, worship, ritual, dedication, sacrifice, commitment, spirit, prayer, suffering, festival, and celebration.”<sup>64</sup> Now with these characteristics noted, we then must consider the definition of religion<sup>65</sup> as defined in chapter one. From the first sentence, you can note that the aspect of religion and sports being spiritual is shared between the two. Although spiritual may refer to the supernatural in a religious sense, sports are spiritual in

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<sup>64</sup> Wann, D. L., Melznick, M. J., Russell, G. W., & Pease, D. G. .“Sport fans: The psychology and social impact of spectators.” New York: Routledge, 2001.

<sup>65</sup>Human beings relation to that which they regard as holy, sacred, spiritual, divine. It is commonly regarded as consisting of a person’s relation to God or to gods or spirits. Worship is probably the most basic element of religion, but moral conduct, right belief and participation in religious institutions are generally also constituent elements of the religious life as practised by believers and as commanded by religious sages and scriptures. (Editors, Encyclopaedia Britannica)



that it becomes a way of life and becomes a way that someone can define themselves. Sports are also sacred in this sense in that a team can unite a community with a proud tradition of winning or with the effort in which they display.

Another aspect in this definition that is worth noting is worship. Whether it is treating your body like a temple or devoting yourself to prayer, worship can pertain religiously in the sports world as well. As discussed before, worship and prayer throughout athletes is not very common on a public stage. However, there are some athletes in which their public display of worship and devotion defines them as a different type of athlete. One of the most notable modern athletes of the modern era to put on full display his religious beliefs is Tim Tebow.

Tebow is the typical type of football player. He was the quarterback superstar who won the coveted Heisman Trophy award for the best player in college football and then later was selected to play in the National Football League. In a league filled with flashy superstars with only a regard for how they are presented, Tebow defies these stereotypical expectations. Throughout his career, not only did Tebow stand out from a football side of things but also for his publicity with his faith. In high school, Tebow was homeschooled by his mother while he was allowed to play football for the local catholic high school team. In college, he became known for writing bible verse on his eye black and always thank god after games in his press conferences. While in the NFL, Tebow introduced a signature move when after scoring a touchdown, he would take a knee while putting his fist on his forehead. This soon developed into a movement called “tebowing” in which people everywhere would post videos and pictures of themselves in this same kneeling position around the world. Pop culture writer Chuck Klosterman sees Tebow’s power as a kind of magic act that we cannot figure out. He says:

“Tebow makes blind faith a viable option. His faith in God, his followers' faith in him-it all defies modernity. This is why people care so much. He is making people wonder if they should try believing things they don't actually believe.”<sup>66</sup>

Tebow's religious ways could be seen as ritual or superstition. However, the fact that he is able to make others believe in the same beliefs and rituals he participates in, does this mean that his actions are beyond superstition? Also, considering his following as an athlete, is Tebow creating a new way to preach religious commitment in the modern sports world of religious subtleness. With his religious presence, there is a notion that these rituals and beliefs that Tebow has allows him to have God on his while playing football. However, when it comes to this most people would lean towards keeping religion separate from the impact it has on a player and relate it to luck. Ross Duhat of the New York Times states the following on the subject:

“[T]he sophisticated atheist will inform you that in a vast and complicated cosmos, there will inevitably be temporary patterns that give the appearance of some divine design. But it would be even more ridiculous for a secular-minded football fan to root against Tebow than for a religious fan to root for him: in a godless, random universe, failure is no more metaphysically significant than success.”<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup>Klosterman, Chuck. “The People Who Hate Tim Tebow.” *Grantland*, December 16, 2011, [grantland.com/features/the-people-hate-tim-tebow].

<sup>67</sup>Douhat, Ross, “Tebow in Baylon,” *The New York Times*, March 24, 2012.

From this one can conclude that something supernatural could have been going on with Tebow when he was playing in the NFL. On another note, an atheist would argue that God doesn't care about the NFL and would not have any impact on Tebow due to the fact he has more important things to tend to. Whether he is seen in a positive or negative way, it is undeniable that he brought a great amount of attention to faith within the sports world and standing up for what you believe in.

It can be argued that Tebow paved the way for Colin Kapernick to stand up for the Black Lives Matter movement. Despite having some success in the NFL, Tebow took criticism for being a devout Christian once his talent on the field started to decrease. Once his success started to dwindle, many fans responded by claiming that Tebow should have paid more attention to football than his faith. This is similar to the Kapernick in that since taking a knee during the national anthem, the attention for his cause was through the roof yet it had a negative impact on his professional career. With both these situations being so similar, it is worth noting the fans response to their decisions. Although Tebow and Kapernick are ultimately standing up for and displaying what they believe in, the criticism from the fans and outside world dictate that Tebow and Kapernick are not doing their job as athletes. Similar to ancient gladiators, the crowd just wants to see them play to their maximum potential, without distractions, so that their favorite team can win the game. Although sports are meant for entertainment, these two men show how it can also be a perfect platform to promote or display a certain ideal. Although this is the case, it is tough for people to see sports as a social platform instead of a form of entertainment. Therefore,

although Tebow and Kapernick may not have received positive responses for their actions, the way in which they might have delivered their stance could have differed.

The last secular part of this definition is that moral conduct and right belief are some of the most basic elements in religion. The act of conducting yourself in a moral way is something in which every human strives to do. This means treating others the way you want to be treated and simply trying to be the best person you can be. Whether it is being a good teammate or being an active member of a religious practice, conducting yourself in a moral way is the ultimate must in order to be respected by people. With this said, right belief ties into this because in order to act right you have to think right. In terms of right belief, this is vague in that every single person could have a different belief about something. Someone could believe Michael Jordan was the greatest athlete of all time while someone else may argue it was Bo Jackson. However, this can also be interpreted as having the right belief or intention in one's actions. Right belief is paired with moral conduct in that you have to have the right mindset in order to conduct yourself morally. In order to truly act you must truly believe in your actions which is the interpretation the definition is mostly likely displaying.

With this said, moral conduct and right belief could pertain to more than social expression. In other words, moral conduct and right belief could help an individual better themselves rather than bettering their image for the sake of other people. Tebow and Kapernick used moral conduct and right belief in order to make themselves feel they gave it their all and did the best they could do in their respective cases. Despite not having a beneficial impact on their careers, they were able to get their message out and inspire many others to be open about their faith and causes they believe in. There are many athletes, however, who take these same steps of

moral conduct and right belief for the sole purpose of bettering their lives. Many athletes, such as Josh Gordon and Josh Hamilton, have been affected with drug and alcohol abuse and choose to end their careers in order to better their lives. This goes off the fact that there's more to life than sports and that mental and physical health take priority over anything else. Other than health, athletes also need to make decisions for the betterment of their careers.

One common trend younger athletes are starting to participate in is skipping or attending college for a limited amount of time. The common way for athletes to become pro is for an athlete to attend a certain university to develop their skills and then eventually go pro. This has created a huge culture for recruiting players throughout the world, with each college coach trying to recruit players to attend and play for their school. Considering this has been the "norm" for such a long time, every high school athlete usually strives to play a college sport in order to be put on a stage to display their talent, hoping they could be a professional some day. Despite this process being deemed the "norm," some recent high school recruits have been taking a different path and skipping college as a whole. Last year, high school basketball player Lamelo Ball was considered the top high school basketball in the world. Despite attracting attention from the top college programs in the nation, Ball took everyone by surprise and decided to go play professionally in New Zealand. Although Ball terminated his chance of playing college basketball and getting the college experience, he made this choice because he thought it would be the best for his career. As a result of this decision, Ball was able to display his talents professionally while also earning a salary and now is considered the potential number one draft pick for the 2020 NBA Draft. Although Ball took backlash for his decision, he was able to use his moral conduct and judgement in order to make the best decision for himself. Although some

decisions may be clear in what is right versus what is wrong, it sometimes takes being the trendsetter in order to figure these questions out or yourself.

Another recent trend that many athletes are starting to do is early retirement. Especially in football, injuries and body trauma are causing players to retire in order to preserve their bodies for the future. In 2010, San Francisco 49er's linebacker Patrick Willis retired at age thirty after eight seasons in the NFL. This was surprising news to many in that Willis was considered a Hall of Fame football player and still in the prime of his career. However, Willis' body was taking such a beating from injuries that he decided to end his career early to ensure a healthy future for him and his family. Although it was not an ideal situation, giving up the game he loved was the precaution that Willis took in order to better his life. Since Willis's retirement, the cases of early retirement from the NFL are increasing due to the research coming out about brain injuries and other forms of injuries within football. From no names to superstars, many NFL players are retiring early in order to ensure a healthy lifestyle for their time after football.

More recently, Indianapolis Colts quarterback Andrew Luck announced his retirement from football. On August 24th, 2019, Luck "stunned the football world" when the news of his retirement broke out during a preseason game while he was on the sideline. Considering the news went viral, the Colts fans started to boo at their beloved quarterback as he started to jog off the field during halftime. Indeed this was shocking news, however it was a stunning sight to see thousands of fans booing their quarterback, who brought their teams great success in the past years he was playing there. Although the process of retirement comes with losing the sport you love, Luck's retirement showed that you could also lose the support and love that came with it. The criticism that came along with Luck's retirement was considered foolish considering Luck's

history of injuries, similar to Willis. However, Luck received more criticism than Willis because quarterback is considered less violent of a position than linebacker, which is simply not true considering the trauma quarterbacks take from hits. On the contrary, however, Luck also received positive feedback and was even considered a hero for his retirement. The fact that he was in the prime of his career and chose his health over a game is what people really appreciated about his move.

With two sides of this decision, it goes to show the significant impact that an individual could have on a community through sports. In a way, both Luck, Willis, Tebow, and Kapernick could be considered martyrs in the game of football. Traditionally a martyr is understood as a person who is willing to die for their country, religion or beliefs. These days, a martyr refers to a person who unnecessarily sacrifices themselves for others, while ignoring their own needs.<sup>68</sup> In the cases of Tim Tebow and Colin Kapernic, their “persecution” was the end of their careers, mostly due to their stance and advocating for certain movements. For Andrew Luck and Patrick Willis, their “persecution” was the ending of their careers due to their stance and advocating for healthy living. What all four players received, however, is both positive and negative press from other people. Whether you seek it or not, there will always be a disagreement to the side you take. In terms of religious martyrs, they are persecuted due to their certain beliefs in their faith. Although all four athletes received positive responses for attending to something more than football, they all received backlash due to not dedicating themselves enough to football and their team. Therefore, for something to be deemed religione the aspect of having controversial or

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<sup>68</sup> Luna, Aletheia, “What is a Martyr Complex? 18 Signs to Look Out For in Others” LonerWolf, December 13, 2019, [<https://lonerwolf.com/martyr-complex-symptoms/>]

debatable ideologies should be another part added to the definition. Throughout history we have seen holy wars due to clashing political and religious ideologies between groups and countries. In sports, fans are always seen fighting with each other simply because the other person has the other team's colors on. Considering this state of competitiveness in sports and uniqueness between different religions, there is a need to address the clashing and differences of ideas in order for a religion to stand out from the others.

Considering the glaring similarities in which the definition of religion pertains to sports, it is quite difficult to not see how sports has developed into a faith in itself. The following sports have gained throughout history is second to no other institution. On January 26th, 2020, former NBA superstar Kobe Bryant and his daughter Gigi unfortunately passed away in a helicopter crash. The memorial for them was held in the Staples Center in Los Angeles and more than 20,000 people attended. For a memorial service to have that many people in attendance was incredible and a fascinating sight to see. From celebrities to fans, people all over the world came to honor this great basketball player. Although many did not know him personally, the fact his athletic ability and accomplishments are able to gain this much respect is something nothing other than sports can achieve. Sports unite people into communities that have no prior relations solely based on the commonalities of love for sports. Going to a stadium or even a friend's house to watch a game has become a common practice amongst people worldwide and has another way for people to connect and form relationships. With such a big impact on modern day culture, sports are seen everywhere in advertising and certain athletes are gaining superhero status from many of their fans.



With so many superstar athletes in today's world, it raises the questions of how many more significant religious figures we may not have heard of due to not enough exposure or oral tradition? In a way, religion could benefit if it learns from the way sports has developed its image. Sports have become such a global establishment and is a way in which everyone, no matter what difference, can bond. With such a global culture, it brings up whether other industries such as music, art, and dance could be considered as well? Many things other than sports and the previous listed have massive followings in which people dedicate themselves to something in which they deem valuable and, in a way, worship. Technically, this could mean that any hobby could be deemed a religion in someone's eyes. Many hobbies and ways of life including a certain type of praise or worship in order to motivate the person doing it. Also, usually these hobbies are based on other people doing them as well, meaning there is some type of following. To conclude, the amount of activities, hobbies or interests people have could be considered types of religion. Considering the following along with the community and faith-abiding process that comes with sports, it seems that sports has developed into a faith on its own.

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