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Routledge Handbook of Physical Cultural Studies

Chapter 10

Religion, Sport and English National Identity

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Introduction

Over the past 30-40 years there has been a steady growth in the academic literature surrounding sport and religion, (see, for example, Benn, Pfister and Jawad, 2010; Farooq and Parker, 2009; Meyer, 2009; Novak, 1976; Prebish, 1993; Watson and Parker, 2013, 2014). Discussions concerning the relationship between sport and the Christian religion have featured prominently in these writings and within this particular literature authors have explored a wide variety of issues, none more so than the socio-theological movement of muscular Christianity (Putney, 2001) – a topic which is central to the aims of the present chapter. In exploring the muscular Christianity ideology, our intention here is not simply to reiterate a series of existing arguments around the alleged origins of modern-day sport, but to bring together (and draw clear connections between) key narratives surrounding sport, religion and national identity. To this end, the chapter addresses the formative and innovative role which the English public schools and the Protestant church in Britain played in the emergence and expansion of formalised sport. In turn, we locate these developments against the wider cultural backdrop of 19th century social change and the dissemination of muscular Christian values and ideals via British imperialism. At the same time we provide an historical analysis of the character and development of English national identity in light of muscular Christianity and how this faith-based ideology served to underpin the imperial and colonial aspirations of the British elite in the Victorian period. In this sense, the chapter provides evidence of the way in which the historical relationship between sport and religion in Victorian Britain allowed notions of British-ness to be seen as synonymous with key facets of English national identity as a consequence of the values and practices of the English public schools.[1] Our first task, however, is to present an overview of the socio-cultural context against which the contours of the sport-religion relationship have been shaped and, in

[1] For a wider exposition of the interconnections between British-ness and English national identity see Hall (1992, 1997) and Kumar (2003).

particular, the forces of secularization that have swept through Western Europe over the past two centuries.[2]

Secularization: A socio-historical overview

Without doubt, secularization has dramatically shaped Western industrial society during the last two hundred years (Taylor, 2007; Bruce and Glendinning, 2010). In the UK church attendance and adherence to Christian beliefs have decreased since the mid-1800s, whilst the growth and popularity of sport has exponentially increased. This has led scholars from a number of social science disciplines (i.e. sociology, history, anthropology, cultural studies, philosophy and psychology) to label sport variously as a "civil religion", "surrogate religion", "natural religion" and/or a "popular religion" (see Watson and Parker, 2014). In his analysis of this functional approach to understanding the sport-religion dyad, Mathisen (2005) has suggested that the term "civil religion" - an idea popularised in academic enquiry by the sociologist of religion Robert Bellah (1967) - succinctly portrays how nowadays individuals often find meaning, self-worth, identity and a sense of significance in and through sports (see also Uszynski, 2016). Civil religion has been defined by Forbes and Mahan (2000, p.163) as identifiable when 'a significant cultural activity takes on the social form of religion'. And so, over time there has been a transformation in both individual and collective national identity. Sport *is* life for some. Sport is also used as a nationalistic tool for geo-political power plays and demonstrations of national pride and status (Higgs and Braswell, 2004), demonstrated, for example, in Olympic medals tables (see Brohm, 1978).

Secularization theory is an approach that is largely based upon the work of the founding fathers of sociology in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries and has been

[2] Sections of this chapter have previously appeared in Parker and Weir (2012) and Watson and Parker (2013, 2014).

applied to sporting sub-culture by social historians (see Gibbons, 2017). For example, Guttmann (1978/2004) in his classic Weberian account of the historical sport-religion relationship, notes how secularized modern-day sport has effectively severed its links from the sacred (unlike Ancient Greek sport), and is, in many ways, functionally not unlike the Roman model of sport—a source of entertainment and national identity. However, the paradigm of secularization is complex and highly contested across academic disciplines (e.g., Francis and Ziebertz, 2011; Gill, 2003). Theologian, Leslee Newbigin (2008, p. 46), comments that:

> many sociologists now agree that the idea that has been dominant during the past half-century, namely that the progress of modern science and technology must increasingly eliminate religious relief, has proved to be false. The present century has in fact witnessed a marked growth in religiosity in Europe.

That said, this upturn in religiosity is not evidenced in Christian terms, with the Muslim faith demonstrating more prevalent growth across a number of European countries including the UK. Reflecting on the impact of the European enlightenment, Taylor (2007, p.13) supports this view stating that 'from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God ... [we have moved] to one in which faith, even in the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others'.

In this sense, a plurality of religious beliefs characterizes Western Europe and England, and yet, non-institutional or established churches (a fast-growing phenomenon) are often not accounted for in survey studies of religious belief and adherence. Gill (2003) identifies shifts in global economic practices and the diverse use of social space as just two confounding variables in the complex debate surrounding secularization. In summary, while

theoretical understandings of secularization are complex and controversial, in general terms, Western Europe (including England and the UK more broadly) has experienced a downturn in Christian religious practice and a significant upturn in the popularity of sport over the last two hundred years. Of course, in order to understand precisely how such a juxtaposition has come about, there is a need to explore more fully the historical roots of the sport-religion relationship and its connection both to notions of British-ness and English national identity, a task to which we now turn.

Muscular Christianity and the English public schools

A well-rehearsed argument in the literature surrounding the relationship between sport and Protestantism in Britain, and indeed in analyses of the development of modern sport *per se*, is that during the mid-19th century certain sporting activities were transformed from a collection of unruly pastimes into a series of structured and codified games via the English public schools (Mangan, 1981; Watson, Weir and Friend, 2005; Parker and Weir, 2012). This transformation, it is argued, was primarily triggered by changes within the governance and practices of these institutions and, in particular, through the work of Thomas Arnold, Head teacher of Rugby School (in the English Midlands) between 1828-1841.

For all the wealth and influence that was attached to English public school culture during the early 19th century, one of the things that these institutions often lacked was a strong sense of leadership and order (Mangan, 1981). This was something that Thomas Arnold sought to address when he arrived at Rugby in 1828. An educated man, Arnold had attended Winchester School and Oxford University where he excelled in the “classics”, his appointment at Rugby being directly linked to criticisms of disorder and unruliness at the school at a time when fears of broader moral breakdown prevailed. He resolved to remedy such “evils” by introducing new forms of governance and new curricular ventures. Central to

Arnold's reforms were his religious beliefs and his desire to transform his young charges into "good Christian gentlemen". Yet the Arnoldian regime amounted to much more than simply playing games; an education in the "classics" continued to be upheld as the guardian of moral character, and the passing of responsibility to older pupils (prefects) as the gateway to discipline, respect and "Christian manliness" (Hargreaves, 1986). News of Arnold's reforms travelled fast both inside and outside of the public schools. One reason for this was the writings of two well-known authors of the time, Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes, and it is to a brief overview of their influence on the development of the sport-religion relationship in England that we now turn.

Sport, empire and nation

During the mid-19th century Charles Kingsley (clergyman, academic, novelist and poet), and his friend and associate Thomas Hughes (lawyer, politician and novelist), became key players in the relationship between sport and religion and, in particular, in the connection between faith-based understandings of sport and English national identity. Specific aspects of their work stand out as especially influential in this respect, perhaps most notably Hughes's book *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857), the story of a boy (Tom Brown) whose character is shaped during his days at Rugby school and the values imbued therein. Hughes had been a pupil of Arnold at Rugby between 1834-1841, but the book is said to have been more generally based on the experiences of his brother, George Hughes. Alongside the work of Kingsley, the sense of high moral value and physical endeavour which *Tom Brown's Schooldays* purveyed collectively formed the basis of what came to be known as "muscular Christianity"; a term encapsulating spiritual, moral and physical excellence alongside notions of Christian manliness. Alas, Kingsley did not approve of the term. Indeed, though commonly attributed to him it did, in fact, emanate from a review of his book *Two Years Ago* which appeared in

the *Saturday Review* in 1857 (Simon and Bradley, 1975). Hughes, however, was more agreeable to the muscular Christian idea going so far as to adopt it in the subsequent, yet somewhat less successful, *Tom Brown at Oxford* (1861).

Of course, in reality muscular Christianity had at its roots a whole range of ethical and moral concerns which were prevalent in the mid-1880s and which played to the Christian Socialist leanings that Kingsley and Hughes held dear: the protection of the weak, the plight of the poor, and, perhaps most importantly, the promotion of moral virtue. The incorporation of these (and other) issues into a framework of physical endeavour and spiritual purity resulted in the establishment of a series of core values which, over time, came to underpin the relationship between sport and religion: fair play, respect (both for oneself and others), strength (physical and emotional), perseverance, subordination, obedience, discipline, loyalty, co-operation, self-control, self-sacrifice, endurance. Integral here was a fervent Christianity and stoic masculinity which collectively engendered the formation of personal character and a respect for the physical body. Revered too were attributes such as courage, temperance and *esprit de corps* - the "holy trinity" of moral virtue, most notably expressed by Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the modern Olympic Games, who was familiar with Thomas Hughes' novels and, after visiting Rugby in 1883, was said to have been heavily influenced by the work of Arnold.

De Coubertin's endorsement of Arnold's work provides but one example of the way in which these ideals came to shape notions of English national identity and to spread beyond Britain's shores. Indeed, whilst a plethora of educational institutions at home became imbued with proponents of the early muscular Christian movement, so too the establishment of sport as a key facet of English-British culture went on to form an established part of colonial rule. Indeed, one of the legacies of the English public schools was their broader geographical impact. As Englishness and Empire became evermore synonymous with technological

advancement, state governance and civil society, and as the UK's economic dominance of overseas nations became something of an industry in and of itself, so sport and games became powerful tools in the battle for hearts and minds around notions of cultural dominance and assimilation. In this sense, the emergence and subsequent development of the muscular Christian ethos was not simply about the widespread diffusion of games. On the contrary, it was but one of several mechanisms in and through which imperialism was sponsored and propagated on both economic and moral grounds (Mangan, 1988, 1998, 2006).

Sport and Victorian Society

Up to this point we have concentrated specifically on the role of key figures and institutions during the early-mid 19th century with respect to the establishment of: (i) the muscular Christian ideology, (ii) the 'games playing' ethos of the English public schools, and (iii) a series of sporting values generated along broadly religious lines. In this section, we locate the emergence of muscular Christianity against a wider socio-cultural backdrop by creating a more general a picture of the sport-religion relationship in Victorian times. As far as the codification and diffusion of sport is concerned, muscular Christianity can be seen to have played a part in the formation of English national identity at a time when Britain was seeking to expand its colonial borders. Indeed, given the stature and kudos of the English public schools and their renown for spawning generations of political and military leaders, it is perhaps not surprising that their graduates took with them a whole series of quintessentially English behaviours and practices on their ventures abroad. At the same time, there were battles to be won closer to home relating to the way in which such ideological processes may or may not unify aspects of broader social division.

The rapid onset and resulting turbulence of industrialisation in 19th century Britain stimulated significant social change: changes in housing, work, and community which, in

turn, generated a series of anxieties amongst the social elite (particularly, it seems, the English elite) over issues such as health, sanitation, welfare, and productivity. This led to a desire amongst the middle and upper classes to improve and refine both the fortunes and the behaviours of ordinary working people in line with a series of altogether more "acceptable" lifestyle values and habits; a movement which Holt (1989) and others have referred to as "rational recreation". Put simply, rational recreation comprised the will of those in positions of power to reform society by diverting the attentions of the masses away from the vagaries of traditional social pastimes and towards new forms of leisure and play; a time when reformers expressed the need to replace what were, in their view, unsavoury popular cultural practices (i.e. drinking, gambling and cruelty sports) with more profitable leisure-time pursuits in order to promote "rational" (as opposed to irrational and unruly) behaviour (see Clarke and Critcher, 1985). As the influence of the church (particularly the Church of England) declined and its powers of moralisation dissipated – this amidst the fragmentation of rural communities and the diminishing influence of "local" religious leaders - legislation and repression came to be seen as the mechanisms by which such change should take shape. In this view, sport in the Victorian age emerges not only as a new form of cultural attraction but as a broader means of social discipline and control (see Holt, 1989; Parker and Weir, 2012).

Whilst fears prevailed amongst the social elite that the leisure-time habits of the working classes were focussed too narrowly on the less desirable aspects of life, especially the frequenting of public houses, such activities, in themselves, were not devoid of sporting inference. Indeed, for many, drinking and sport went hand in hand; the alehouses becoming synonymous with sporting activity, either as places for spectator debate or for organised competitive events (see Mason, 1980). As Holt (1989) has noted, it was not uncommon for boxing rings and bowling greens to be built on to these establishments or for gambling to take

place as a result. Moreover, as sport became embedded in popular cultural life, working class men in particular readily accepted the lure of mass spectator sport where, for many, a sense of community and identity was rejuvenated amidst the emergence of the Saturday half-day (see Mason, 1989; Tranter, 1998).

At a popular cultural level at least, the development of sport in England during the late 19th century may be seen as something of a battle ground with regards to class conflict and disunity. The English middle and upper classes sought to regulate and codify the sporting pastimes of the masses in the hope of eradicating the unruliness of bygone days and the hedonism of working class life. Rational recreation was the device by which this was to be achieved: a movement designed to counter moral slippage, mass delinquency and mob culture. Of course, it would be misguided to assume that this was simply a process of imposition and acceptance. On the contrary, the working classes resisted such initiatives finding free expression both in the maintenance of residual leisure-time habits and their nuanced appropriation of new sporting forms. Needless to say, by now sport had become an embedded part of both English and wider British culture and a commonsense facet of everyday life.

Neo-muscular Christianity: Sport and the church in the modern era

Given the class tensions and disunity surrounding popular cultural pastimes, how and in what ways, we might ask, was English Protestantism implicated in all of this? In line with the work of other historians, McLeod (2003, 2007) has noted that from the 1850s onwards sport (especially football, rugby and cricket) became an increasingly prominent aspect of social life in Britain with public sporting events being patronised both by the middle and working classes from the 1870s onwards and, perhaps not surprisingly, the church began to follow suit.

The inclusion of sport as a part of church life often came about as a consequence of the introduction of a series of broader activities into congregational leisure time. These comprised such events as afternoon teas, picnics, games and amusements, gatherings which, in one way or another, carried long-held vestiges of English-ness. Such innovation was not without its doubters. Indeed, there were criticisms from some quarters regarding the vagaries of sport, primarily that "amusement" should not become the mainstay of the church and that all the energy of God's people should not be spent trying to retain the interest of the young at heart. But church-leisure links were more complex than simply the setting up of football teams and the organisation of play and games. Evident also was the formal establishment of libraries, chess, billiards, tennis and cycling clubs and, specifically for females, rounders, table tennis, hockey, gymnasia and callisthenics (see McLead, 2007).

All of this culminated in the development of a sophisticated network of activities the underpinning principles of which appear common to both Anglican and Nonconformist churches. Notwithstanding the increased level of tolerance demonstrated by liberal in comparison to evangelical churches, from 1850 onwards there was evidence to suggest that in England at least Protestantism had begun to accept sport as a legitimate and holistic lifestyle pursuit. To this end, it can be argued that sport added to a broader secularization of the Church around this time. Of course, there were on-going debates and tensions surrounding the role of sporting activity in church life which included anxieties over the kinds of moral values that sport promoted and whether or not these were commensurate with Scripture, and concerns surrounding the allocation of time to sport amidst the dissolution of strict sabbatarianism. Indeed, geography and nationalism were never far from such debates. One such example is that of Welsh rugby. Though several junior Welsh rugby teams were originally founded by churches, non-conformists were often discouraged from participating. The Welsh Revival of 1904-5 had a significant impact in this respect, with players stopping

games to go to church, cancelling fixtures, dissolving their teams or transforming them into prayer clubs. Hence, engagement between the Protestant church and sport in the UK during the latter half of the 19th century was evident but not unilateral. Evangelicals remained less convinced of the value of sport viewing at as a transient pastime to be put aside in order to take on the more important tasks of life. Key sporting figures epitomized this stance. Scottish athlete Eric Liddell, whose story has become well known as a consequence of the 1981 film *Chariots of Fire*, won a gold medal in the 400 metres in World Record time at the 1924 Olympics in Paris but is probably best remembered for his refusal to run in the 100 metres – his strongest event – because of the fact that the heats for the race fell on a Sunday. Viewing his faith as a more profitable pursuit that his athletic career, Liddell gave up competitive sport in 1925, returning to his birthplace, China, as a missionary teacher (Parker and Weir, 2012). On the other hand, from the mid-19th century onwards, the Church of England seemed to be much more sympathetic to the accommodation of sport and leisure within the context of the Christian life despite such encouragements being geared, at least in part it seems, to the eradication of the strong sense of Puritanism permeating its orbits and the resultant alienation of "ordinary folks". To this end, it is fair to say that sport was not only a site of tension and conflict at a broader societal level during the Victorian period, but it was at the heart of some considerable disunity between those within the Protestant church both within and across national boundaries.

The appropriation of sport by Protestantism in England appears to have peaked around the turn of the century yet wider developments in this area were only just beginning to take shape. The period 1850-1900 witnessed the formal codification of a number of sports and emergence of a series of national governing bodies, mainly in England, i.e. The Football Association (1863). Moreover, the intimate relationship between association football (soccer) and Christianity in England during the late Victorian period is demonstrated by the fact that a

number of English clubs—Aston Villa, Barnsley, Birmingham City, Bolton Wanderers, Everton, Liverpool, Fulham, Manchester City—were founded by churches or Christian organisations (see Lupson, 2006). After World War I the public provision of playing fields increased and after the 1944 Education Act physical education became mandatory in the state school sector. Moreover, the Physical Training and Recreation Act of 1937 enabled Local Authorities to provide facilities for sports clubs. Perhaps somewhat inevitably, the advent of World War II curtailed such progress with investment in public provision only re-emerging in earnest after the formation of the Sports Council in 1966. As was the case in a host of other countries, the UK witnessed a boom in secular sporting provision during the second half of the 20th century. From 1965 the community use of schools at evenings, weekends, and vacation times added to this. Likewise, after 1960 the commercial provision of golf, tennis, sailing, shooting, squash and other sports grew, further facilitated in the 1980s by the emergence of thousands of fitness clubs both public and private. Alas, this secular explosion in sport does not appear to have been replicated within faith settings. Indeed, the demise of sporting activity in many Protestant churches throughout these years further illustrates the unprecedented nature of church sport links in the Victorian period (Collins and Parker, 2009).

The gradual disconnection of sport and religion in English culture began in the early twentieth century, although this was more a consequence of the two World Wars, the great depression in 1929 and other major shifts in society, rather than an aggressive decline in religious belief and practice (Ladd and Mathisen, 1999). Following the Second World War, there was a critical re-assessment of major social institutions and a discernible shift away from organized religion towards atheism, or individualised and eclectic forms of personal spirituality. At the same time the institution of sport was becoming more and more professionalised, commodified and secular in its orientation (Holt, 1989; Mason, 1980; 1989). Commenting on this historical era and beyond, Hoffman (2010) notes how sports now

“compete for our religious sensibilities” and have become more and more significant with regard to both English and American national identity.

The powers of secularization have also been demonstrated via subtle shifts in the organization and administration of sports participation and practice, something brought about by the decline in belief and practice of the Sabbath. In the 1990s most UK youth soccer leagues moved from Saturday to Sunday mornings, which had a direct impact on attendance of young people—mainly young males—at Church (Collins and Parker, 2009). A similar trend has been identified in the “secularization of Sunday” in North American communities (McMullin, 2012). McMullin observes that sporting activity, especially amongst young people, is one of the main competitors to regular church attendance and engagement in a Christian community. The findings of such work, however, do not provide the full picture with regard to the sport-religion secularization narrative, as communicated in Yamanee’s (1997) “double movement of secularization” theory that can be applied to both American and English cultural settings.

Yamanee *et al.* (2010) note that while early social theorists—Comte, Durkheim, Weber, Marx—held that “the acids of modernity” were destructive of supernatural religion and therefore presented ample data for a theory of secularization, neo-secularization theory, also enables religious activity. A case in point is the existence and development of neo-muscular Christian organizations, such as the *Fellowship of Christian Athletes* (1952-) and *Athletes in Action* (1966-) in the US, and *Christians in Sport* (1980-) in the UK. These groups, according to Yamanee *et al*. (2010, p. 89), ‘use sport to legitimize religion’ which suggests:

> They accommodate themselves to their secular reality, and this process exemplifies the double movement of secularization: Secularization at the societal level allows for the proliferation of religious activity at the organizational level, but these religious organizations that seek to engage other social spheres must do so on the other spheres' terms.

There is much more that could be said about the double movement of secularization theory, with regard to both its strengths and weaknesses. It does, however, resonate with the view of some scholars, such as Hoffman (2010), who have critiqued the liberal accommodation of the values of modern sports (in particular violence) in the practice of individual Christians and those Christian organisations that sometimes represent them (see also Krattenmaker, 2010). All of which allows us to appreciate the extent to which the sport-religion relationship has developed over time and how issues of national identity and disunity continue to pervade its everyday practices.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter our intention has been to present an overview of the way in which the historical relationship between sport and religion has impacted notions of English national identity during the last two hundred years. In turn, we have sought to explore the extent to which commonsense readings of this relationship run the risk of conflating British-ness and English national identity amidst the social transformation and imperial expansion of the Victorian period. In so doing, we have argued that, through the work of Thomas Arnold at Rugby school and via the influence of English writers such as Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes, Victorian England (and Britain more widely) played host to the emergence of a sport-religion relationship which propagated a series of underpinning values; English-British

values which then began to permeate sporting endeavour both at home and abroad. A number of wider social conditions and circumstances can be seen to have nurtured the emergence of this relationship, one of which was a middle and upper class pre-occupation with the social habits and pastimes of the industrialized working classes. We have subsequently highlighted how, over time, the ideological sporting values formulated during this period have been modified in various ways and, in closing, we offer our thoughts on the further development of this relationship and its potential in terms of broader notions of national identity and unity.

Within all of this, there is evidence to suggest that both in the UK and the US the vestiges of evangelical negativism towards sport remains. It is true, for example, that some denominations and church leaders (both within and across national boundaries) continue to see sport as something which detracts from (or counters) spiritual growth and maturity. On the other hand, sport, as a specific area of religious ministry, has witnessed something of a resurgence in the UK in recent years and is now an established field of outreach both within church and para-church organisations and within secular settings. Likewise, those involved in sports ministry at a national level continue to press forward in relation to establishing a presence in elite sport; this is perhaps most frequently evidenced in and through the involvement of interdenominational, faith-based organizations with mega-events such as the Olympic and Paralympics Games (see Green, 2016). On a slightly smaller scale, the modern-day face of the sport-religion relationship plays out in chaplaincy provision both to elite and amateur clubs across the sporting spectrum and to individual athletes and though primarily located in English sport such practices are becoming more prevalent further afield (see Parker et al., 2016).

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