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Editorial: Special Issue: Theology, Disability and Sport: Reflections on Physical and Intellectual Impairment and Well-Being

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Editorial

One of the most touching scenes in Jim Sheridan's Oscar-winning film *My Left Foot*, features a penalty kick in a street game of soccer (Sheridan, 1989). The film tells the story of the Dublin artist Christy Brown, who was born with cerebral palsy in 1932. Brown grew up in working-class Dublin, fully accepted and integrated into the life of the neighbourhood around him. As a teenager, he was included in the hard-fought games of football played out in the laneways around his house, goalkeeping effectively while lying on the ground. In this particular scene, playing against some boys who do not know Christy well, there is derision and mocking as he is carried forward to take a penalty kick. The opposing keeper is scornful of the threat posed by this severely disabled man, who then promptly places the ball skilfully beyond his reach with the use of his famous left foot. The prejudice that perceives an incongruity between disability and displays of sporting competence was painfully laid bare for that goalkeeper, left to defend his performance against his angry teammates while Christy is warmly celebrated by his companions.

In recent years there has been a significant increase in interest from theologians thinking about disability (e.g., Adogame, Watson & Parker, 2017; Brock & Swinton, 2012; Eiesland, 1994; Yong, 2007), sport (e.g., Ellis, 2014; Harvey, 2014; Hoffman, 2010; Watson & Parker, 2014, 2013) and the relationship between, sport and disability (Watson & Parker, 2015). This trend is further demonstrated by the The office of the 'Pontifical Council for Culture' within the Vatican, recently hosting an international conference entitled, *Sport at the Service of Humanity* (2016, 4-7 October), which according to the 'official report', written by the Oxford University theologian and a key sport-theology scholar Robert Ellis, had a central focus on social justice research and praxis, which included physical and intellectual disability sport (Ellis, 2017).

The commissioning of this event at the Vatican, the seat of the Catholic Church, is embedded in the Pontificate of the late Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis, whose theology/sociology and leadership is closely tied to social justice and the championing of those with disabilities in the sports realm (e.g., John Paul II, 2000, 1985; Puggioni, 2016). The profile of the keynote speakers at the Vatican sport conference, which included Pope Francis, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, the President of the International Olympic Committee, Thomas Bach, the CEO of Special Olympics, Timothy Shriver, and the General Secretary of the UN, Ban Ki-moon, further reflects the growth of academic and public discourse surrounding the sport-religion symbiosis. Such a conclusion is buttressed by the success of the recent *Inaugural Global Congress on Sports and Christianity* (IGCSC) (2016, 24-28 August, York St John University, UK), that had a thematic strand on the theology of disability (the source of this publication project) that was convened by Dr Brian Brock. That said, no sport-religion publication projects to-date (across the monotheistic traditions) have *specifically* addressed the application of academic ‘Christian theology’ in the sport disability arena.

And so, the intersection between sport and disability is a fertile one, as demonstrated by the suggestive scene in Sheridan’s film, *My Left Foot*. The disabled athlete challenges the preconceived notions and implicit biases of wider society. The world of disability sport challenges the excesses and decadence of wider sporting society. And the consideration of play in the light of disability illuminates many explicitly theological questions, as evidenced by the papers here collected.

In *The Culture of Sport, Bodies of Desire, and the Body of Christ*, Benjamin Wall draws on the work of the French sociologist and theologian Jacques Ellul to expose the ableist biases functioning within the sporting imagination. As Wall conceives it, much of the recent Christian embrace of sporting culture can be accused of the conformity which Ellul

describes as the “conversion of Christians to the spirit of power.” The church as the body of Christ is called to maintain a distinct vision of how bodies should be, refusing to prize the Olympian ideal of modern competitive sport. Wall draws on popular sources to skilfully present the troubling ways in which the prized sporting body is invested with a racial and ableist meaning, affecting “the character and development of the larger social imaginary,” particularly in terms of “values concerning bodies and their relation to the human flourishing.” Conformity to that vision must be resisted by the church, where “weak and less honorable bodies are considered indispensable and thus honored.”

Kirsty L. Jones considers the world of equestrian sport as one domain of competition where a diversity of body types is welcomed. Her essay, *Outside Horses, Inside Men: Equestrian Sport, Disability, and Theology*, explores how four phenomena – interdependence, vulnerability, mutual enabling, and normalcy – common to able-bodied and disabled riders can furnish theological insights. Her article is richly informed from personal experience and she vividly describes the bond that can form between horse and rider. That connection is not linguistic, it does not rely on abstract concepts, it is not mediated by the market, and therefore it is open to those with intellectual disabilities in a unique fashion. There is a levelling effect such that riders with an intellectual disability, she argues, are “less disabled in the saddle than in school or church.” The horse and the rider meet in shared vulnerability and encounter in each other a mutual enabling that “makes a mockery of the frequent idolizing of athletes.” Instead of reading equestrian sport in terms of its potential normalising effect, Jones argues subtly that horse riding “strips excess disability.” Disability is not removed, but it is relativized on the back of a trusted equine companion. This argument is one of the first theological investigations of the relevance of equestrian sport for disability theology and it is likely to be much referenced in the future. Its implications for a range of theological questions and disability sports research interests are manifold.

In their essay *Sport, Theology, and the Special Olympics: A Christian Theological Reflection*, Nick J. Watson and Simon Kumar propose that the Special Olympics stand as a counter-example to the excesses of more mainstream competitive, professional sport. Drawing on the work of the American theologian Amos Yong who argues that when writing to churches in the Greek city of Corinth, in a culture at least as preoccupied with sporting events as we are today, “Paul’s model athlete is less the champion of the Isthmian games than today’s Special Olympian.” Watson and Kumar thus suggest that competitors in the Special Olympics warrant particular attention from Christians. Watson and Kumar do not intend to demonise contemporary professional, commercialized sport. Rather, by drawing our attention to the many virtues of the Special Olympics they intend to prophetically challenge our ableist and utilitarian values. The prophet, remember, always preaches with the hope of redemption. By reference to concrete examples – like the Special Olympian Loretta Claiborne and the University of Alabama American football stalwart John Mark Stallings – Watson and Kumar demonstrate how such an approach intersects with the Christian commitment to “vulnerability and an ethos of downward mobility.”

Paul Shrier continues on this Special Olympics theme in his essay *Messengers of Hope: A Boy With Autism, His Church, and the Special Olympics*. This essay is also notable for how it is grounded, not in abstract theorising, but a sustained engagement with one family’s experience of participation in the Special Olympics. Born as the youngest of Gabby and Kathy Leon’s four children, Michael was diagnosed as autistic in pre-school. Although initially devastated, with the help of their local church and the Special Olympics, the family adapted and Michael thrived, even after becoming diabetic. Shrier uses this young man’s experience to investigate how Special Olympics represents a significant interface where community groups (in this instance the Montrose Church) have their preconceived notions about disability dashed as they encounter the flourishing lives of the athletes. The three

theological categories that Shrier examines in the light of Michael Leon's experience are hospitality, the paradoxical Christian understanding of strength and weakness, and the role of competition.

In Nick J. Watson and Brian R. Bolt's essay, *From Team Hoyt to I'll Push You: An Embodied Prophetic Message*, we again encounter a theological argument built quite directly from reflecting on lived experience. In this instance, the authoring duo report on two pairs of athletes whose stories exhibit the potential for disability sport to go beyond serving as instrumentalized inspiration-material to display profound anthropological characteristics. Drawing on the famous work by Johan Huizinga and more recent work by the likes of Robert Ellis, the authors suggest that "humans are delightfully curved toward play in its many forms." This is no less true for humans with disabilities. They draw our attention to Dick and Rick Hoyt, the father-and-son "Team Hoyt" who have together completed over 1,000 endurance races in the last forty years, in spite of Rick's quadriplegia. Alongside Team Hoyt, they consider the lifelong friendship of Justin Skeesuck and Patrick Gay, who together walked the 500 mile path of the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage, even though Justin has the use of neither his arms nor legs. Through reflection on the pushers and the pullers, the pushed and the pulled, Watson and Bolt propose that these stories expose our usually hidden vulnerability with an unusual clarity.

Brian Brock's *Embodying Compassion: Disability Sport and the Mercy of God*, starts with a common trope in Christian discourse about sport: What is the appropriate place of prayer in competition? Yet his answer, which is that it should be modelled on the prayer of the repentant tax collector of Luke 18 – "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner" – initiates an entirely more penetrating trajectory than is commonly achieved in such conversations. The flat moralism which pervades too much of the writing and thinking by Christians about sport is challenged by Brock's robust theological account of compassion as grounded not in

generic concepts of “fair play” but in God’s commitment to stand towards humanity in mercy. This reorientation of our commonsense view preserves “the centrality of the biblical insistence that, in the final analysis, it is always God’s mercy that protects and rescues human life.” In a paper filled with fascinating insights – the implication of the Leper’s Chapel in Zwolle and the scandal of the “anthropological exhibit” at the 1904 Olympics linger with me months after first reading them – Brock closes with observations grounded in the concrete example of the Hughes family. The theology of sport is woven here into the fabric of the wider Christian life, as Brock suggests that mercy for the athlete is not a category set-apart. Like all Christian acts of compassion, the competitor is merciful when they “understand what they are doing as part of the movement of divine mercy for those in need of rescue and a place where they can be at home.”

John Swinton initially delivered *Running for Jesus! The Virtues and the Vices of Disability and Sport* as a keynote address at the Inaugural Global Congress on Sport and Christianity at York St. John University in 2016. Granting that sport, at its finest, can be a “beautiful and holy practice,” Swinton argues it also presents a temptation towards “self-glorification and idolatry.” He does not seek the *via media* between these two poles, but much more ambitiously seeks to inquire as to whether sport can be conducted “for Jesus.” This is serious challenge because “whose Jesus we aspire to be is complicated psychologically as well as theological.” Imagining participation in sport in these terms, as an imitation of Christ, runs the risk of inviting influential contemporary cultural notions to take the place of the historical Jesus of Nazareth. When we habitually hear sports stars described in salvific terms, we can end up with a Jesus who is “powerful, strong, resilient, refusing to be defeated, single-minded, competitive, combative and determined to overcome whatever obstacles stand in his way.” Yet that Jesus bears little resemblance to the gentle and loving figure we encounter in the Scriptures. Swinton develops an alternative framework for

understanding competition, counter-culturally committed to love of neighbour, even the neighbours on the opposing teams. Sport, he argues, should be “an arena for the manifestation of the magnificence of the *nephesh*-filled body and the fruits of the Spirit.”

In my own essay, *Calling for a Time-Out: The Theology of Disability Sport and The Broader Understanding of Competition*, I develop an argument that resonates with Swinton’s. My goal is to challenge one of the fundamental assumptions about competitive sport – that winning is what matters. This assumption needs to be challenged for reasons outside of sports. The same principle is at play in our workplaces and our larger economy, much to the detriment of many, especially those with disabilities. By framing competition around the idea of games – in this instance computer gamification – I seek to show how the philosophy of brutal competition that is taught on the sports field is increasingly at play on the warehouse or office floor. As we construe competition, it is all about measurement and comparison. Yet one of the unspoken effects of this competitive drive is that that which cannot be easily measured is easily discarded. The value of sports apart from victory becomes elusive, and much more seriously, the value of an employee apart from productivity becomes minimized. This is both a problem that particularly impinges on those who have disabilities (excluded from mainstream sport and often excluded from the workforce) and a problem which is in part resolved by considering sport played by disabled people. There we encounter a framework of motivations that relativize winning at all costs in favour of running the right race, rightly.

This political perspective is continued powerfully in Stuart Braye’s piece entitled “*You Shall Not Murder*”: *Atos at the Paralympic Games*. Braye subverts popular opinion, which has broadly welcomed the increasing coverage and attention paid to the Paralympic games, by drawing attention to the ways in which the International Paralympic Committee secures its position in distinction from, rather than in solidarity with, the disabled people’s

movement. This provocative argument is sustained by considering the role of Atos, a French multi-national corporation and premier sponsor of the Paralympic games, which also implemented the highly destructive “Work Capability Assessment” programme implemented by the British Government from 2005. His argument positions this political and economic arrangement in dialogue with the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4. The International Paralympic Committee gladly received the financial backing of Atos, while Atos were running a service for profit which led to the deaths of over 2,000 people with disabilities. Braye’s point is a crucially significant one; the social outcome of a movement’s initiatives is inextricably tied up with how they do their business and who they employ. The Paralympic sport movement embraced the benefits that came with mainstream acceptance but in critical ways became disconnected from those they exist to serve. Even in terms of employment, the British Paralympic Association becomes a site “of exclusion for disabled people.” Having read Braye’s article, no one will be under the impression that sloganeering, television coverage, or other superficial achievements will satisfy the cause of justice when it comes to making space for those with disabilities in our society.

In the 2014 BBC film *Marvellous*, we encounter Neil Baldwin, a man with intellectual disabilities, who refuses to let talk of his “difficulties” go unchallenged (Farino, 2014). Baldwin’s life testifies to the coherency of the social construction of intellectual disability. A recurring motif through the film is that while Neil struggles with buying healthy food or keeping on top of household chores, there are many more significant things that other people find immensely stressful and difficult which do not trouble Neil. Baldwin is something of a local legend in his hometown of Stoke, in a large part because of the role he played as kitman with Stoke City Football Club. Many of the most decisive scenes of the film rotate around his efforts to assert himself in the dressing room and how his unbridled passion for the game became a means of communion with others. Sport, for all of the distractions

generated by a media-driven celebrity culture and all the distorting influences of wealth and status, remains at base a context for community.

These collected essays consider profound questions about anthropology and ecclesiology, engage in serious Biblical interpretation, and offer strident political and social critiques. But they are never far removed from the field of play or abstracted from the players. The joy that Baldwin takes in playing and watching and talking about football is infectious to everyone, even seasoned and cynical professionals. This abundant joy that can flow from games well played is worthy of deep theological reflection, and indeed devotion. Our hope is that this publication project might contribute towards that end.

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