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Routledge Handbook of Physical Cultural Studies

Chapter 23

**Spiritualized and Religious Bodies**

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## **Introduction**

Those who have written about the relationship between sport and religion are in general agreement that academics outside of the traditional social-science sports studies disciplines (i.e. sociology, history, anthropology, philosophy and psychology), such as theologians and philosophers of religion, have been slow to recognise the cultural significance of modern-day sports (see Watson, 2011a). In this chapter<sup>1</sup>, we argue that this trend is slowly changing. In addition to the emergence of research centres, academic journals and sport-faith initiatives, contributors to recent monographs and anthologies that analyse the different facets of the sport-religion relationship have emanated from a plethora of disciplinary fields and subject areas.

It is widely accepted that links between the sacred and sport have been evident across a number of historical periods. These include primitive times when ritual-cultic ball-games were played to appease the gods (for fertility), the athletic spectacles of ancient Greece and the Olympic games that were held in honour of mythological deities, the gladiatorial contests of Rome, the festivals and folk-games of the Middle-ages in Britain and Europe, Puritanical suspicion and prohibitions against sports, and, of course, Victorian muscular Christianity (c1820-1910), a socio-theological movement that significantly shaped the character of modern sports (see Guttman, 1978/2004; Mangan, 1981; Shilling and Mellor, 2014). Additionally, there is a small corpus of work that has explored how sport interacts with other monotheistic and eastern (pantheistic) world religions, such as Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and Shintoism (see Magdalinski and Chandler, 2002; Prebish, 1993). These accounts provide

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter includes extracts and ideas from previously our published work (see Howe and Parker, 2014; Watson, 2007, 2011a, 2011b; Watson and Parker, 2013, 2014, 2015).

useful comparative insight for those examining the sport-Christianity relationship which is our primary focus in this chapter.

Given Christianity's Hebraic roots and its inseparable ties to Jewish history, faith and tradition, contemporary debates surrounding Judaism and sporting pursuit undoubtedly assist scholars when examining the sport-Christianity nexus, especially in relation to historical, theological and sociological research on embodiment and identity. In the following discussion our central aim is to review a selection of existing academic work on sport and spiritualised/religious bodies. We begin with a brief overview of the more general literature on sport and religion, focusing thereafter on a topic around which our own recent research has been located, that is, sport and the disabled body. To this end, the chapter is structured around four main themes: (i) sport, spirituality and religion, (ii) sport, religion and the body, (iii) sport, religion and the disabled body, and (iv) sport, religion and re-embodiment. We have chosen these themes to demonstrate the contribution which a physical cultural studies approach might bring to the academic interrogation of sport and spiritualised/religious bodies (Silk and Andrews, 2011). We take as our starting point the notion that such investigations seek to explore and locate physically active bodies within the social, political and economic contexts which they inhabit and how they are represented, organised and regulated by the power structures in and against which they sit (Andrews, 2008). Drawing ideas from a range of key disciplinary areas, i.e. theology, sociology and disability studies, we highlight the way in which the study of spiritualised/religious bodies might, at the same time, shape the contours of physical cultural studies itself. Needless to say, it is to an exploration of the first of our four themes that we initially turn.

### **Sport, spirituality and religion**

Over the past 30-40 years there has been a steady growth in the academic literature surrounding sport and religion, (see Watson and Parker, 2013, 2014). Within this literature a key historical theme has been that of muscular Christianity - a narrative that locates the development of modern-day sport in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Britain amidst the alleged transformation of unruly pastimes into a series of structured and codified games, primarily via the English public schools (Parker and Weir, 2012). A key player in this transformational process was Thomas Arnold, Head teacher at Rugby school between 1828-1841, whose desire it was to mould his (male) students into 'good Christian gentlemen' by way of competitive games, an education in the classics, and generous helpings of discipline, respect and morality (Mangan, 1981). Most notable amongst documentary representations of Arnold's legacy is Thomas Hughes's fictional account *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857/1995), the story of a young boy (Tom Brown) whose character is shaped during his days at Rugby school around what came to be known as 'muscular Christianity'; a term encapsulating the development of Christian manliness in line with notions of spiritual, moral and physical purity (Simon and Bradley, 1975). Of course, in reality, muscular Christianity had its roots in a whole range of wider ethical and moral concerns which were prevalent in Britain during the 1800s; the protection of the weak, the plight of the poor, and the promotion of moral virtue. The incorporation of these (and other) issues into a framework of physical and spiritual 'wholesomeness' resulted in the establishment of a series of core values which, in time, came to characterise the relationship between sport and religion: fair play, respect, strength, perseverance, subordination, obedience, loyalty, co-operation, self-control, endurance. Especially significant here was a fervent Christian faith and stoic masculinity which collectively engendered the formation of personal character and a respect for the disciplined, physical body. Revered too were virtues such as courage, temperance and *esprit de corps* - the 'holy trinity' of moral stature - subsequently expressed by the sporting ventures

of Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the modern Olympic Games.

Of course, as modern sporting forms evolved and professionalization and commercialisation ensued, muscular Christian values became less prevalent amidst a backdrop of moral and ethical decline (see Watson and Parker, 2013). In turn, considerations of the spiritual and religious aspects of sport became somewhat marginalised within the broader orbits of sports studies, an issue which Shilling and Mellor (2014: 351) have recently highlighted as “potentially antagonistic” to broader attempts to establish the societal importance of sport especially given the cultural and political significance of religion (and religious practice) in modern-day life. That said, vestiges of the underpinning values of the muscular Christian era persist in commercialised sport where physical/bodily ‘perfection’ continues to be celebrated, glorified and revered. Advertising, the media and the contemporary marketing techniques of consumer culture have largely been responsible for the promotion and ubiquitous perpetuation of the ‘perfect body’ amidst a spontaneous lifecourse outlook where impulsivity and mass consumption reign and where ideals of youth, fitness and beauty have come to represent a central focus of social existence (see Featherstone, 1991; 2010; Shilling 2012). Such values sit in stark contrast to the realities of life for those whose experiences of embodiment are less straightforward especially in relation to disability sport (Howe and Parker, 2012; Watson and Parker, 2012). Before exploring in more detail how embodiment is negotiated and reconciled within this specific context and to what extent notions of spirituality and religion might feature as a part of this overall picture, we first turn our attentions to a broader analysis of the connections between embodiment and religion.

### **Sport, religion and the body**

In his brief history of the relationship between mind and body within the context of religion and sport, Hopsicker (2014) has outlined the extent to which dualistic thinking dominated early religious conceptions of the human body with Ancient Greek philosophy (and in particular the work of Plato and Aristotle) positing intellectual thought as superior to physical activity. Platonism advocates that there are two distinct realms: the visible material world and the invisible spiritual world, which results in the material (including the body) being viewed as inferior. Reinforced by Gnostic and Manichean philosophies, such inferences were perhaps most (in)famously played out during the Enlightenment period by the Roman Catholic philosopher René Descartes whose work frequently featured the promotion of cerebral over corporeal pursuit (Cartesian mind-body dualism). Not surprisingly, these ideas influenced many within the Christian church where theological discussions concerning the body historically carried negative connotations concerning the potential evils of its undisciplined form (Scarpa and Carroro, 2011). In turn, physical and intellectual ventures were often framed as polar opposites in theological circles with the former being portrayed as spiritually unworthy.

As we have seen, in Britain at least, the 19<sup>th</sup> century brought with it a change of heart on the part of the church with regards to the value of the body and the role that physical activity might play in holistic wellbeing (see Collins, 2014). Such changes aligned with widespread social upheaval surrounding processes of industrialisation and secularization. Denominational debates persisted about the irrelevance and distractive potential of sport to spiritual and moral development. Yet, church leaders addressed these tensions in various ways and over time there emerged a general acquaintance between the church and sport and a growing acknowledgement in religious circles of the value of physical activity and of the physical body.

Despite the fact that the church-sport relationship is now firmly established and that more recent theological analyses have identified sports participation as both embodied and corporeal (see Ellis, 2014, Harvey, 2014), dualistic tensions remain especially in some evangelical (Christian) quarters where a propensity to perpetuate the mind/body dichotomy continues. There are, of course, complex historical and cultural reasons for this, not least the church's general drift away from its Hebraic roots and *holistic* understandings of human beings and the sacredness of the body. As Wilson (1989) notes, for the Hebrews, there is no separation of the secular and the sacred. To them, life is a unified, theological whole:

In Hebrew thought, a person is a soul-body ... viewed as a single entity, an indivisible whole ... "soul" or "spirit" refers to the whole person or individual as a living being ... One's body (i.e., entire being) is to be offered daily in joyful obedience as a "living sacrifice" (Rom. 12: 1). On the one hand, pleasure and satisfaction are not ends to be pursued in themselves; on the other, enjoyment of the material and physical aspects of this life is far more than mere preparation for higher things. To enjoy is an opportunity to bring blessing to one's Creator, "So whether you eat drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31).<sup>2</sup>

As Watson (2011b) goes on to point out, these understandings are predicated on the biblical position that *all* humans are made in the image of God—*imago Dei* (Gen. 1:27) and comprise soul, body and spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:23). The Platonic-Cartesian dualism deeply entrenched in Western thought is further combatted in such traditions by referring to the soul, body and spirit holistically as the *heart*, a Hebrew and Pauline perspective. This view

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<sup>2</sup> This quotation comprises extracts from the following sections of Wilson's (1989) text: 'Foundational not Optional' (pp.131-132); 'Everything is Theological' (pp.156-159); 'Dynamic Unity versus Dualism' (pp.167-171); and 'Spirituality: Heavenly or Earthly' (pp.174-178).



maintains that though comprising different elements, human beings are thoroughly integrated entities. Against this historical backdrop, it is clear that mind and body are integral to the sport-religion interface. So how then might we frame these historical debates when developing of a theology of disability sport?

### **Sport, religion and the disabled body**

Following the publication of Eiesland's seminal work, *The Disabled God* (1994), which focusses solely on physical disability, a growing literature has emerged on the theology of both physical and intellectual disability (see Brock and Swinton, 2012; Yong, 2007). Predating Eiesland's work, scholarship has specifically examined intellectual disability through a Christian lens (see for example Hauerwas, 1986). This body of empirical research has evolved across all of the major Christian denominations and within a number of related disciplines, (i.e. religious studies, sociology, ethics, education and psychology) (Swinton, 2011). Prior to the mid-1990s there was some theological reflection on disability - albeit more common within the orbits of the Catholic church - which was borne out of the disability rights and other civil rights movements of the 1970s but one might argue that this was, and still is, viewed as an area of 'specialist interest'. Hauerwas and Vanier (2009), however, suggest that the biblical themes of weakness, vulnerability, mutuality, hospitality, humility and love are at the heart of the Christian faith and thus integral to sound theological debate.

The reasons for the relative lack of theological reflection on disability are many but as Reynolds (2008: 68) states, a major determinant in this respect is that theology has been "... taken captive by the cult of normalcy", that is, it has often adopted a starting point rooted in Enlightenment philosophies and ideas, especially utilitarianism, rationalism, free-market capitalism, abelism and intellectualism. In thinking about and interacting with those people in

society who have disabilities, it may well be that we are also confronted with our own fragilities and weaknesses (physical and intellectual) and therefore, disability can ‘disturb us’ (Yong, 2007). As we have seen, the pervasive influence of Platonic-Cartesian dualism in theology (Wilson, 1989) and sport (Twietmeyer, 2008) has also been a factor in de-emphasising and devaluing the role of the body, and able-bodied and disabled sport as a whole, in Western culture. Theological reflection on the “... full diversity of experiences of human embodiment” has, in turn, been lacking in theology (Creamer, 2009: 117), until that is, the emergence of the more recent ‘body craze’ in the discipline, as is the case in the field of sports studies since the 1990s. This focus on the body in academic studies of sport is, of course, embedded in the central importance of the ‘perfect body’ in both sporting and wider social contexts.

To varying degrees publications on the theology of disability critique the socio-cultural structures and institutions that marginalise, alienate, oppress and devalue the disabled. Disability sport scholars following the foundational work of the Marxist sociologist Michael Oliver (1990), mainly advocating the social constructionist model of disability, have analysed how access, provision of facilities in schools and communities, funding, media and cinematic representations and the overall status and perceived importance of disability sports, is significantly different to able-bodied sport, for example, the Olympic Games (Thomas and Smith, 2009; Howe, 2008). A particularly thorough and nuanced analysis of negative socio-cultural structures is presented by Reynolds (2008: 56-70) who discusses the ‘economies of exchange’ that fuel the ‘cult of normalcy’ and ultimately configure the lens through which modern society views the disabled:

Consciousness of worth is something that transpires according to what I call an ‘*economy of exchange*’, a system of reciprocity that regulates interactions in a community ... The attribution of worth never occurs in isolated form as an individual’s thought process, but rather within a complex set of social arrangements and reciprocal relationships that distribute, and appraise values ... Economics of exchange, therefore, revolve around identification markers that display what I call *body capital* ... All kinds of cultural productions are involved, such as beauty, athleticism and intelligence ... The body is an icon representing the effects of power ... cast in the form of the dominant culture’s sense of the good.

The dominant culture of our age borne from the Enlightenment modernist principles of individuality, self-sufficiency, materialism, rationalism, free-market capitalism and power, encourage a ‘cult of normalcy’ that, Reynolds (2008: 62) goes on, “... tells people with disabilities who they are, forcing them by various societal rituals to bear a name that is ‘depersonalizing’, and this leads to ‘alienation’, both socially and personally”. This ‘tyranny of normality’, as Hauerwas (2004) has called it, so grips our culture that we are often in denial as to its existence, preferring to suppress our own fears and insecurities and thus maintain the status quo. Such practices of unconscious denial comprise what Kierkegaard (1989/1849: 74) labels a “spiritless sense of security”, a “fictitious health” that underpins many of the institutions of our society (Brueggemann, 2010), including sport (Watson, 2012; Stringfellow, 1973/2004). This empirical reality has been evidenced in a burgeoning sports ethics, and fast-developing theology of sport literature, an example of which we now consider.

### **Sport, religion and re-embodiment**

In their qualitative study of the interconnections between historical conceptions of sport and contemporary arguments surrounding re-embodiment, Howe and Parker (2014) highlight the importance of religious engagement for a group of high performance (elite, Paralympic) athletes dealing with issues of impairment and how the act of re-embodiment (being metaphorically ‘re-born’) in line with Christian beliefs and understandings was something to which their respondents turned in order to make sense of their place in the world. The specific focus of the authors is the extent to which the life stories of the athletes concerned were layered with religious symbolism and inference, and how the spiritual ‘journeys’ or ‘pilgrimages’ that these individuals embarked upon gave new meaning to their lives.

In their analysis of the personal accounts provided by their respondents, Howe and Parker (2014) illustrate how the transition from life as an able-bodied individual to one with impairment was seen by a number of athletes as a pilgrimage through which they found spiritual significance in relation to the changes that had occurred to their bodies and to their lives more generally. Coming to terms with disability (and an accompanying sense of ‘reduced’ social status) was a key turning point for many and alongside this came a process of self-reflection which engendered a consideration of ‘greater purpose’ and ‘religious calling’ around advocacy and support for others with disability. Given that such support processes were located - for this particular group at least - within the context of elite sport, crucial to this calling was a sense of re-embodiment. Because of the relationship between the origins of modern-day sport and Christianity (i.e. the benefits of a healthy body and healthy mind), and of the moral and ethical connections between physical activity, embodiment and the Christian faith, there is a sense in which one might argue that the spiritual journey evident within these re-embodiment narratives is somewhat unsurprising. That said, and as Howe and Parker (2014) are quick to point out, not all high performance athletes who experience a

sense of post-accident vulnerability seek to make sense of their 'new world' in this way. On the contrary, for some the journey to re-embodiment takes place on an entirely secular basis whilst others find solace via alternative belief systems. Nevertheless, for a number of the athletes concerned, a holistic 'healthy body, healthy mind' ethos was integral to their sense of purpose and calling and, perhaps more importantly, their understandings of their bodies post-impairment, this in line with the sporting activity which they sought to undertake. In this way, spiritual and religious reflection allowed these athletes to positively re-imagine their 'physical selves' which, in turn, facilitated a renewed sense of hope in relation to their futures and their potential contribution to individuals in similar circumstances and to wider society. Indeed, so powerful was this re-imagining process and the spiritual journeys and pilgrimages that these athletes experienced, that some came to reflect upon their re-embodiment as a process of 'transformation' and (metaphorical) 'resurrection'.

As Howe and Parker (2014) note, such acts of re-embodiment inevitably demand new understandings of personhood around a re-conceptualised integration of mind and body (Csordas, 1994; Seymour, 1998). In turn, one of the ways they suggest we might make sense of these spiritual journeys is to think of religion as a mechanism for facilitating a re-configuration of 'wholeness' in line with Csordas' (2002) three stages of ritual healing: (i) predisposition, (ii) empowerment, and (iii) transformation. Utilizing this framework, Howe and Parker (2014) argue that it may well be that high performance athletes who have experienced impairment by way of traumatic accident journey through these stages as part of a rite of passage to re-embodiment. The first stage (predisposition) requires that the individual believes that a level of rehabilitation is possible - a belief that is devoid of any false sense of hope that they will somehow overcome their impairment and which follows instead an acceptance of and adjustment to their new social reality. The second stage

(empowerment) is where the individual realizes that the healing of the body and the mind are linked by some form of spiritual power, where they begin to articulate a faith that is beyond the realities of the social world in which they live, and where a close allegiance to religious doctrine and spiritual experience form. The final stage, comprising the transformation from ‘able-bodied non-believer’ to ‘impaired believer’ follows, it seems, a process of resurrection. This necessarily requires a wholesale acceptance by the individual of their re-configured life and the expectations and behaviours which go with it, yet at the same time this acceptance is grounded in a sense of renewed purpose and calling around physical re-embodiment, spiritual positivity and social contribution.

On the basis of the empirical evidence which Howe and Parker (2014) present, it appears that spiritual and religious belief may provide disabled athletes with new understandings of embodiment and of their position in the social world. As a consequence, rather than allowing their lives to be hindered by impairment, such individuals “take the symbolism associated with Christ’s broken (and subsequently resurrected) body as a powerful and transformative means by which they ... can come to view their journey to re-embodiment afresh: as one of fate and destiny; as a road to emancipation; as a blessing in disguise” (Howe and Parker, 2014: 21). In this sense, these athletes not only determine to accept and adjust to their impaired bodies, but can be seen as being metaphorically ‘born again’ into a whole new social existence in and through which they use their new-found religious/spiritual experiences to positively impact their own lives and those of others.

## **Conclusions**

It has been our intention throughout this chapter to consider the relationship between spirituality, religion and embodiment within the context of sporting participation and, in

particular, we have explored disability sport as a site where this relationship might manifest itself most clearly. In so doing, we have examined the interconnections between historical conceptions of religion and embodiment and how spiritual and religious attachments might shape everyday sporting realities. In turn, and by way of an interdisciplinary perspective, we have attempted to explore some of the social, political and theological complexities that impact spiritualised/religious bodies and how they might be represented, organised, regulated and ultimately emancipated. To this end, we have attempted to demonstrate the contribution which a physical cultural studies approach might bring to the academic interrogation of the sport-religion relationship.

Of course, we recognise that there are many additional ways in which such interconnections and attachments might be explored. For example, scholars and empirical researchers may wish to examine notions of embodiment in sporting locales from different faith perspectives, i.e. Judaic and Islamic. These kinds of investigations may necessarily stimulate discussion around the nuances of denominational affiliation, geographical circumstance, and political affiliation. Additionally, theological research on the disabled body (Watson and Parker, 2015) and the genetically modified body (Trothen, 2013, 2011) is at an embryonic stage and requires further theoretical and empirical development. Research from a religious perspective on the gendered sporting body is, to date, relatively sparse but this has been identified as a key area for future research (see Watson and Parker, 2014). Investigations into varying modes of religious and spiritual embodiment will inevitably help scholars to think more critically about the potential relationship between sporting participation and theological anthropology. In turn, such work has the potential to (re)locate spirituality and religion more firmly as topics of discussion within sport studies as a whole.

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