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Abstract

There has been a significant increase of scholarship, empirical research (within both theology and the social sciences) and church based initiatives focussed on sport and Christianity during the last decade. This essay seeks to briefly map these developments and provide a position statement by way of addressing two topics: (i) theological reflection on sport, and (ii) church and para-church engagement in sport. In conclusion, a number of recommendations are provided for future research and ecclesiological praxis.

Keywords

Sports, theology, church, para-church, research

Introduction

When Stanley Hauerwas, a theologian and sports fan, wrote the foreword to Christopher H. Evans and William R. Herzog II's book, *The Faith of 50 Million: Baseball, Religion and American Culture* (2002: xiv) he noted that '… a book about the relation of baseball, Christianity, and America 'risks not being taken seriously. The whole project seems too whimsical to be appropriately "academic"'. Over the last decade, Hauerwas's perception of the need for and credibility of theological reflection on sport has been justified. The organisation of a number of major academic-ecclesiological meetings reflects this trend. For example, in 2016, Hauerwas himself was scheduled to deliver a keynote address (on baseball and faith) at the *Inaugural Global Congress on Sports and Christianity* (IGCSC), hosted by York St John University, UK, in partnership with Bible Society. The IGCSC attracted 180 delegates from 24 nations. It is worth citing the aims of the Congress as they convey something of the broader strategic direction and current trends within the sport-Christianity field:

> To encourage global collaboration between academics, practitioners, politicians, clergy, administrators and athletes
>
> To produce quality academic and practitioner publications that have societal impact
>
> To affect a 'culture shift' in modern sport through the sharing of ideas and practices and a 'coming together' of individuals from across the academic disciplines and all streams and denominations of Christianity, culminating in an inclusive and ecumenical event

Adopting a similar progressive and ecumenical vision, the Pontifical Council for Culture of the Vatican in 2016 hosted an international conference, *Sport at the Service of Humanity*. This event brought together religious and business leaders, politicians,

professional and amateur athletes, media representatives and other stake-holders, with the aim of further examining how sport could be used as a vehicle for 'social good' i.e., a social justice agenda (Ellis, 2017). The significance of the Vatican conference and the IGCSC, alongside an exponential growth in scholarly research and practical initiatives over the last decade, suggests that sports have finally 'arrived' in both theological and ecclesiological forums. The aim of this essay is to provide: (i) a brief overview of theological reflection on sport and practical initiatives within church and para-church organisations, and (ii) identify key resources and suggestions for future research and praxis. When the term 'sport(s)' is used within this essay it refers to a form of play that is competitive, rule-governed, has a specific goal/purpose and involves the exercise of skills and strategies. This is to be differentiated from the terms 'leisure' and 'recreation' that theologians have also addressed (Heintzman, 2015).

Theological Reflection on Sports: A Brief Overview

Modern academic theologians have been surprisingly slow to engage in the study of sport, although major figures, such as Karl Barth and Jürgen Moltmann have offered brief musings. Moltmann wrote a short but influential book on the theology of play (1972) and an essay in the *International Journal of Theology* that examined the religious and political dimensions of the Modern Olympic Games (1989). Similarly, Barth occasionally referred to sport as a cultural artefact within his vast corpus, for instance, when reflecting on The Lordless Powers, Barth (2004: 229-230) suggests that: "Today what is called sport seems to have become the playground of a particular earth-spirit. In most cases the old and honest saying "a healthy mind in a healthy body" … no longer can be invoked today as a rational explanation of what motivates active sporting figures … Why all the fuss and fury? … What is the majesty that has brought to the Olympic Games the regular cultic form of worship, praise, laud and thanksgiving … It should be obvious that we have here a special form of

derangement. Man has lost and continually loses his true majesty. It is inevitable that, in this matter too, sense should change into nonsense."

Barth's probing questions remain relevant today and Protestant and Catholic scholarship over the last two-to-three decades has addressed a number of these themes. Aside from scholarship that has provided exegesis and cultural analysis of the Pauline 'athletic metaphors' (Pfitzner, 2013), critiques of violence in the Ancient Olympics by Tertullian and other Church fathers (Poliakoff, 1987), analyses of sport and physical activity in the Old Testament and within Judaism (Mendelsohn, 2009) and the Medieval era (Kelly, 2012), it was the Catholic lay theologian and social commentator, Michael Novak's text, *The Joy of Sports* (1967/1994), which provided the first systematic analysis of the sport-Christianity nexus in the modern world.

The publication of Novak's seminal text coincided with sports becoming more professionalized, commodified and politicized during the 1960-70s. These changes to how sport was understood and utilised by individuals, community groups, commercial enterprises and governments, also led to the need for social-scientific analysis of sports and the birth of 'sports studies' in the academy. Subsequently degree programmes, scholarly organisations and refereed journals emerged in the late 1960-70s, which examined sport from philosophical, historical, scientific, anthropological, sociological and psychological perspectives.

While a secular and positivist philosophy characterised these new sport-based disciplines (and largely still does), early scholarly contributions to the Philosophy of Sport (i.e., ethics, aesthetics, epistemology and metaphysics) advocated the need for metaphysics to fully understand the sporting experience (the founding scholar was a Catholic, Paul Weiss, 1969). However, the analytical school of philosophy soon became the dominant approach

within the discipline and the *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*. In short, ethics became divorced from metaphysics in the majority of analyses of sport (see Twietmeyer, 2015).

Encouragingly, the *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* and the more recent journal, *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy*, now publish significantly more work on sports and religion/Christianity. In addition to these writings, Protestant and Catholic theologians have examined a wide-range of issues in sporting locales that is documented in a now burgeoning literature (see Watson and Parker, 2014). While not exhaustive, the following list identifies some key topics that have been addressed within this body of literature:

> Play; embodiment and dualism/holism; gender; prayer; sin; ritual and liturgy; evangelism and mission; Pauline athletic metaphors; chaplaincy and pastoral care; puritanism; Victorian muscular Christianity and muscular Judaism; statements of the Magisterium/popes; secularization and sport as a surrogate/civil religion; physical and intellectual disability; physical education, coaching and mentoring; 'race' and ethnicity'; well-being and health; transcendence; beauty; risk and aesthetics—especially in 'high-risk' sports; protestant work ethic and capitalism; mystical and spiritual experience; sectarianism; socio-political issues; corporate social responsibility; sport psychology consultancy; fandom; patristic responses to the Ancient Olympics; interfaith initiatives; international development; peace and reconciliation; Olympics, Paralympics and Special Olympics (i.e., mega-events); virtue development; church and para-church initiatives and organisations; overtraining, and burnout—welfare and harm; sabbatarianism; the nature of competition and winning; tragedies in sporting stadia; doping; various forms of sport-related violence, especially within combat sports, such as, boxing and mixed-martial arts; institutional corruption; gambling and match-fixing; business and economics;

idolatry and hero worship; virtues and vices; non-corrective surgery for performance enhancement; transhumanism; bio-ethics, and: gene therapy.

Further theological reflection on these topics is important, however, given that the age in which we live which is characterised by global political, religious and cultural uncertainty, arguably the most important area for theological analysis surrounds social justice issues. For example, those issues related to gender, disability, 'race' and ethnicity, sexuality, age, and well-being within the context of sport (e.g., Watson, Hargaden and Brock, 2018). These issues characterise some of the activities of related university based centres of research excellence and scholarly groups, for example the: *Centre for Sport, Spirituality and Religion* (University of Gloucestershire, UK), *Centre for the Study of Sport and Religion* (University of Tennessee, US), *Mirenda Centre for Sport, Spirituality and Character Development* (Neumann University, US), the *Youth Spirituality and Sport Institute* (Baylor University, US) and the *Religion, Sport and Play* group of the American Academy of Religion.

To conclude this section, it is worth noting that following the publication of a special issue of the *International Journal of Theology* in 1985 (5, 205), the last decade has witnessed fifteen journal special issues on the subject of theology and sport. And, during the last decades Protestant and Catholic theologians have produced numerous single-co-authored texts and edited collections.[1] The exponential increase in publications within the sport-theology field has been mirrored via in the following three trends: (i) a significant increase in the engagement of the major institutional churches within the sports realm (ii) increased understanding and collaboration between practitioners—clergy, chaplains in sport and sports ministry personnel, academics, athletes, and politicians, and (iii) the continued growth and

[1]e.g., Adogame, Watson and Parker, 2017; Ellis, 2014; Deardorff and White, 2008; Harvey, 2014; Hoffman, 2010; Hoven, Watson, and Parker, forthcoming; Kelly, 2012; Lixey, Hübenthal, Mieth and Müller, 2012; White, forthcoming.

development of para-church sports ministry organisations (1952-) alongside the more recent engagement by the institutional churches.

Church and Para-Church Engagement in Sport

Following in the footsteps of the late 'Sporting Pope', John Paul II, in his opening address to the delegates of the 2016 global Vatican Conference, *Sport at the Service of Humanity*, Pope Francis, stated that:

> "Sport is a human activity of great value, able to enrich people's lives … When we see athletes giving their best, sport fills us with enthusiasm, with a sense of marvel … When [played] like this, sport transcends physicality and takes us into the arena of the spirit and even of mystery ... I trust that these days of meeting and reflection will allow you to explore further the good that sport and faith can bring to societies. I entrust to God all that you do, every hope and expectation, and from my heart invoke his blessing on each one of you." (Ellis, 2017)

Embedded in Pope Francis' message is the suggestion that sport can be a vehicle for the 'common good'; an approach congruent with Catholic teaching on social action/justice. Social justice (generally seen my missiologists as a part of mission) alongside evangelisation, has been a central focus with regard to the engagement of the major institutional churches over the last decade, and this is something that also aligns with recent trends in the literature, and most importantly perhaps, the age in which we live. The Church and Sport Office of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for the Laity was birthed in 2004 (commissioned by John Paul II) due to the Church's recognition of the cultural significance of sport. The Office has subsequently convened a number of international conferences with resultant publications (e.g., Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 2011).

The *John Paul II Foundation for Spo*rt (2004-) based in London, UK, has also provided theological reflection and educational programmes for schools from a Catholic perspective. The official report of the 2016 global Vatican conference, *Sport at the Service of Humanity*, identified the 'Declaration of Principles' within sports—joy, compassion, respect, enlightenment, love and balance—that framed discussion and strategic action points in 'thematic discussion groups' during the event. Similarly, a group of theologians, clergy, sport practitioners and social scientists (the Sports and Christianity Group) met on a number of occasions at US higher education institutions, to create *The Declaration on Sport and Christian Life* (2014)—a number of the members of this group are also active within the American-based, *Christian Society for Kinesiology, Leisure and Sport Studies*. Sport based initiatives within the Church of England (CoE) during the last 10 years have also mirrored those emanating from the Catholic tradition.

In 2014, Bishop Tony Porter, the ex-Manchester City FC club chaplain, was appointed as the 'Archbishop's Sport Ambassador' to provide leadership on ministry in sport within the Church of England. In partnership with the national governing body for sport, *Sport England*, the CoE, also convened a national consultation on sport and church at Loughborough University in 2014, entitled, *Mobilising the Church of England to Engage with Sport in Mission and Ministry*. This meeting led to the publication of a research report and a number of practical initiatives, in particular within the diocese of London (Crabbe, 2015). Following this, in February 2016, a meeting was convened at the CoE headquarters, Lambeth Palace in London, entitled, *Ministry of Sport*, at which the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, and the Director of *Christians in Sport*, Graham Daniels, delivered keynote presentations.

In 2017, the CoE has initiated two events that demonstrate a clear mission strategy embedded in the social justice agenda that characterises the wider cross-denominational

'community action' movement in the UK: (i) a one-day conference at Bishopthorpe Palace, York, UK, entitled, "*Beyond the Fringe*"*: Considering how the Ministry of Sport can be Effective reaching the Marginalized and Excluded*, and (ii) a *Capital Mass* project (Diocese of London) that utilises sports ministry to address the child mental health and obesity crises in the UK. Beyond the development of sustainable ministry in sport programmes, the global church has also begun to serve and minister before, during and after, sporting mega-events, such as, the Olympic and Paralympic games.

An example of a truly multi-denominational sport-faith initiative was the creation of *More than Gold*; a group of representatives from multiple Christian denominations—CoE, Catholic, Baptist, Methodist and Salvation Army—to offer service and hospitality through mission at the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. The effectiveness of this 'mission-service-hospitality' model deployed at sporting mega-events, has recently been examined by Meyer and White (2016), who conclude that the community-based faith events are an effective way to do mission within complex relational sporting subcultures. What is perhaps most encouraging about these church-based developments, is the very evident spirit and practice of ecumenical collaboration and partnerships. The majority of Church-based sport events discussed herein have been initiated and developed in consultation with the leaders of sport ministry and chaplaincy in sport organisations globally, but especially in the UK, US and Australia.

Most scholars agree that Billy Graham's use of sports stars in his crusades (i.e., 'platform ministry') during the 1950s was a significant reason (amongst others) for the evolution of organised sports ministry para-church groups in the middle of the twentieth century. The *Fellowship of Christian Athletes* (1952-) in the US, was the first organised attempt at ministry, in and through, sports. Similar groups have emerged in the interim, notably in the US, *Athletes in Action* (1996-) and *Baseball Chapel* (1974-), and in the UK,

Christians in Sport (1980-) and *Sport Chaplaincy UK* (1991-). The purpose and mission of these sports ministry organisations varies, across nations and cultures, For example, the US-model of sports ministry (and chaplaincy in sport) is typically more 'evangelical' in style, while organisations such as Sport Chaplaincy UK have a clear 'pastoral' mission focus (Parker, Watson and White, 2016). One clear trend, however, within the last decade is a reduction in the focus on 'overt' evangelism (especially the use of professional athletes in 'platform ministry') and a realignment of strategy in which practitioners address the pastoral and holistic needs of athletes. Scholars, such as Ladd and Mathisen (1999), have provided a multi-pronged critique of the strategies adopted by sports ministry para-church organisations (e.g., a utilitarian approach to sport), outlining a number of questions with regard to its underpinning theology and praxis. That said, Watson (2013), while acknowledging some areas for critical reflection, contend that sports ministry organisations provide what the Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggeman (2010) calls a 'light'; an alternative and opposing story (a prophetic voice), to that of the empire and its many manifestations in culture, including the sub-culture of professional sports—what they label the 'modern sporting Babel'.

Conclusion

The aim of this essay has been to provide a brief overview of theological reflection on sport and practical initiatives within the Church and Para-Church organisations and to identify key resources and suggestions for future research and praxis. Given the limited scope of this work, my deliberations have focussed on the key themes in the literature (and key publications) and existing and emerging Church and para-church projects. For those wanting a more-detailed overview of the field, Watson's and Parker's (2014) systematic review of literature is the most comprehensive survey. With regard to developing a 'global' research

strategy/agenda and furthering ecumenical church and para-church initiatives, I suggest the following actions:

- Scholars working in the sport-theology field could engage and collaborate with scholarly groups, such as, *The Global Network of Public Theology* and the *British and Irish Association for Practical Theology*. This would help raise awareness of the field and further enhance its credibility within the discipline of academic theology.
- The *Second Global Congress on Sports and Christianity* (2019, October 23-27) could act as a 'meeting point' for leading scholars, politicians, clergy, and sport-faith practitioners to discuss the viability of a scholarly society that would house a refereed journal, which is cross-denominational and inter-and-trans-disciplinary. This journal could have a 'practitioner's corner' to ensure continued academic-practitioner collaboration and 'application' of theological reflection.
- Further integration of theological reflection on sports into school and university sport and theology/religious curricula, which addresses contemporary ethical, legal, political and religious issues, as a means of critically engaging young people in current affairs
- Interdisciplinary and multi-method research (Parker and Watson, 2014) and Church programmes that examine (and address) a wide-range of social justice issues in, and through, sports. Examples of such issues include: concussion/CTE in American football, soccer, rugby, boxing and mixed-martial arts; sport-exercise-dementia initiatives for the elderly (Watson, Parker and Swain, 2017); the recent growth and nature of E-sports; sexual abuse/assaults in hyper-masculine sporting environments, including Christian college sport programmes in the US (Krattenmaker, 2017); mentoring and rehabilitating the vulnerable through sports—including young people

whom are fatherless (a crisis of our age) and/or suffer from mental health problems, and those incarcerated in young offenders institutions.

To-date, there has been more focus in the sport-theology literature on the many ethical and moral problems that persist in sport. While continued critical analysis of sport and its sub-cultures, by theologians and church leaders, is wholly necessary and appropriate, perhaps, moving forwards a broader vision for those operating in the sport-faith domain, should focus on the positive value and 'goods' of sport, what Robert Johnston (forthcoming) has called a *hermeneutic of engagement and appreciation* (versus a hermeneutic of suspicion and separation). This something that Pope Francis recently intimated in stating that, "Sport is a human activity of great value, able to enrich people's lives" (Ellis, 2017).

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