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EDITORIAL

The wheelchair basketball proved less noisy and disruptive than might have been expected: the three-a-side match, contested under the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral, impressed the congregation in its skill and grace, and proved to be a highlight of the first-ever Paralympic service on Sunday (17 August). Organised in conjunction with the British Paralympic Association and the English Federation of Disability Sport, "Courage and Faith: The opening service for the London 2012 Paralympic Games", was not part of the official programme, but was billed as an "act of worship", "part of the Christian response to the Games.

(Boulding, 2012, p. 3)

We feel sure that Sir Ludwig Guttmann CBE, FRS (1899-1980), the German neurosurgeon who founded the *Stoke Mandeville Games* in 1948 in England, which was the platform for the Paralympic movement (1960-) and Michael Ramsey (1904-1988), the incumbent Archbishop of Canterbury at that time, could not have possibly anticipated a 'Paralympic Service' (including a practical sporting demonstration) in one of England's most iconic places of worship. This event was just one example of the ways in which the modern-day Church (mainly through the temporary multi-denominational organisation, *More Than Gold*) and the Olympic Multi-Faith Chaplaincy Initiative, engaged with the London 2012

Olympic and Paralympic Games. The Church of England (2012) released a prayer for the Paralympics that was composed by the Liturgical Commission and which was published online. A Baptist-led charity, *The Haiti Hospital Appeal*, in partnership with the Haitian Paralympic Committee, collaborated to send a Paralympic team to London 2012 to “... help counter the “harrowing” stigma of disability in Haiti”, which is something that was acutely heightened by the many disabling injuries received by citizens following the Haitian earthquake in 2010 (Hobson, 2011, p.1). Ahmed Kelly, an orphan loved and raised by the Sisters of the Catholic organisation, *Missionaries of Charity* in Baghdad, Iraq, was able to compete in a swimming event at the London Paralympics (Greaves, 2012). These Paralympic stories (amongst many others), were reported in well-known religious media outlets, such as *The Church Times*, *The Catholic Herald*, and *The Baptist Times*, which reflects the growing interest in the area of ‘disability’ amongst the Christian community (and amongst theologians) more broadly (e.g., Brock & Swinton, 2012; Reynolds, 2008; Yong, 2007).

With regard to academic research on the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, there have been a significant number of Special Editions published for social science journals that have focussed on the Paralympics and disability sport. Examples are: (i) *Qualitative Research, in Sport Exercise and Health* (Smith, 2012), and (ii) the *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education* (Jobling, 2012). However, a review of any number of these publications highlights that they are, without exception, devoid of reference to the spiritual and religious dimensions of the Paralympics Games and/or disability sport. There is also a significant body of social science literature that has addressed the Paralympics (Schantz & Gilbert, 2012; Legg & Gilbert, 2011; Brittain, 2010; Bailey, 2008; Gilbert & Schantz, 2009; Howe, 2008), the Special Olympics (e.g., Coreen *et al.*, 2012; Harada *et al.*, 2011; Gillespie, 2009; Siperstein, Kersh & Bardon, 2007; Farrell *et al.*, 2004), disability sport (e.g., Le Clair, 2012; Smith & Sparkes, 2012; Winnick, 2011; Jespersen, and McNamee,

2009 ; Thomas & Smith, 2009; De Pauw & Gavron, 1995), individual disability sports (Juette & Berger, 2008; Berger, 2009), and issues of disability in leisure settings (e.g., Cushman & Gidlow, 2012; Horne & Howe, 2009). While this corpus of work is invaluable for understanding the social, cultural, political and historical aspects of disability, in and around sport and leisure locales, the absence of debate surrounding spirituality and religion within this literature would appear to be something of an oversight.

Further to reading and corresponding with theologians that have examined issues of disability, we have identified very few reflections on the connections between sport, religion and disability save for those emanating from such sources as: papal addresses (see John Paul II, 2000, 1985), theological essays on the Special Olympics and Paralympics (Watson, 2013a, 2012; Watson & Parker, 2012; Brock, 2012), sections of a recent doctoral thesis and book chapter that addressed the Special Olympics (Shafer, 2012: 189-196; Yong, 2007:114-15), academic conference presentations concerning the theology of disability sport (Swinton, 2012; Watson, 2013b, 2011a,b; Watts, 2007) and empirical research and writing on women, disability and Islam (Limoochi, 2012; Gaad, 2011, 2006).

Hence, having established that neither, social scientists or theologians had ‘bridged the disciplinary gap’ between religion, disability and sport/leisure, we felt the need to begin a conversation on this topic. To this end, the essays and empirical studies found herein, address a wide-range of critical questions surrounding sport/leisure, disability and health. The scope and remit of these contributions goes well beyond the London 2012 Paralympics, yet this has been the historical and cultural context against which we developed this project. In line with the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (2006, article 30), we hope that the range of essays on offer may encourage the community of scholars and practitioners in this particular field, to reflect upon how opportunities for persons with disabilities to engage in sport and leisure activities might be further developed; opportunities,

which we argue, have the potential to offer physical, emotional *and* spiritual benefits. With these issues in mind, the three broad aims of this project are to provide:

- (i) Original empirical research and scholarship on the spiritual and religious aspects of physical and intellectual disability sport and leisure. It is hoped that this developing corpus of work will be published in journals from a variety of disciplines, for example disability studies, sports studies, sport sociology, theology and religious studies, thus facilitating the broad dissemination of knowledge and thus change in general practice, legislation and pedagogy.
- (ii) Practical recommendations for those working with the disabled in sport and leisure contexts (for example, the Special Olympics, Paralympics, Community Disability Sport, L'Arche communities) and Sports Ministry organisations who, to date, have been somewhat reluctant to engage in disability sport (Watson and Parker, 2014). It is hoped that these discussions will help those involved in the administration and leadership of disability sport and leisure to grasp how the relationship between sport and disability can be viewed from a spiritual and religious perspective. And, in turn, how such a standpoint has the potential to impact current secular understandings of disabled sport participation, models of coaching, and 'relating' to those with disabilities.
- (iii) A critique of what Thomas Reynolds (2008), calls the 'cult of normalcy' in modern culture that marginalizes the disabled, and which is often characterized by the perfect 'muscular' athletic body and personal status gained primarily through accomplishment in the professionalized 'win-at-all-costs' culture of elite sport.

In summary, this project is both ‘exploratory’ and interdisciplinary, and in this sense, we hope that scholars and practitioners alike will find it to be a useful stimulus and ‘starting point’ for thinking critically about the rich and fascinating interconnections between sport and leisure, disability and religion.

Co-Guest Editors

Nick J. Watson and Andrew Parker

September 2013

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