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Radical Orthodoxy and the Emergence of Spiritual Hero-Athletes: Examining Lance Armstrong's 'Illness' Narrative

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Abstract

This essay examines how stories of overcoming illness are important components of popular narratives, media representations, and cultural understandings surrounding American hero-athletes such as Lance Armstrong and his portrayal as a cancer survivor. Understood through the theology of Radical Orthodoxy, Armstrong's experience with cancer put him at the centre of the global effort to *fight* cancer and, in turn, he arguably became a figure imbued with latent spiritualistic themes. This essay identifies, offers examples of, and critiques how illness narratives lend spiritual attractiveness to hero-athletes. The theory of Radical Orthodoxy, as presented in the writings of scholars such as Graham Ward and John Milbank, will be utilized to examine the hero-athlete, Armstrong. As Ward (2000; 214) states, hero-athletes, such as Armstrong, are examples of angelic hosts who 're-enchant' the world with a 'theological imaginary'. In conclusion, we argue, that while Armstrong's athletic accomplishments, illness, recovery and subsequent charity work through the Foundation *Livestrong*, may have some spiritually and religiously significant 'imagery' with regard to legitimizing the 'hero-athlete' rhetoric in the contemporary western sport context, when gazing through the lens of Radical Orthodoxy, these activities are largely 'spiritually empty' and 'idolatrous in nature.'

KEY WORDS: Cancer; hero-athlete; Lance Armstrong; Radical Orthodoxy; sport media; idols

INTRODUCTION

> The world has a need for heroes. In youth we love our heroes without reservation, in age we see them more plainly—but we still love to admire admirable people; to establish that meaningful, one-way relationship with a person who has done heroic things. Sport exists to fulfill that need . . . Lance Armstrong . . . was the hero of his own myth. He "beat" cancer, as if it were just another sporting opponent . . . .
>
> Barnes (2013a, p.17).

> Armstrong was a hypocrite of the 21st century, a hypocrite of the new secular faith that states that with positive attitude you can do anything, you can "beat" cancer, as if the disease were a test not of body but of personal mettle; you can win the Tour de France seven times; and you can make the French eat *merde*. Thousands bought into it and supported his cancer charity by wearing the yellow rubber band with LIVESTRONG on it. The bracelet appealed to the vanity of the wearers. It said that I, too, am a person with strong values, that I, too, am a person of this strong secular faith in the power of personality.
>
> Barnes (2012, p.71).

These two quotes by Simon Barnes, Chief Sports Writer at *The Times* (UK), echo the popular hero-athlete narrative of American cyclist Lance Armstrong that include his portrayal as a cancer survivor, who exhibits unique spiritual characteristics of illness and identity within the modern sporting context. When examined through the lens of Radical Orthodoxy, Armstrong's case offers an understanding of the spiritual function sport idols can have. Armstrong's experience with cancer, what we refer to throughout as his 'illness narrative', has become a

standard for a global effort to *fight* the disease and also involves latent spiritualistic themes. Armstrong's survival of cancer and subsequent highly visible athletic achievements, as a case study, reveals several unique and interesting spiritual references to his image and cancer story. This essay critically examines the heroistic (athlete) image of Armstrong's illness narrative that includes latent spiritualistic themes. The theories of Radical Orthodoxy scholars, such as, Graham Ward and John Milbank, will be applied to Armstrong's case to offer insight into how hero-athletes like Armstrong become, as Ward (2000, p. 214, 224) states, angelic hosts who "re-enchant" the world with a "theological imaginary" that are "revisited as a marketable product". We argue that while Armstrong's popular image came to have spiritual significance in the lives of millions, a *real* yearning for God remains.

Lance Armstrong's very public experience with cancer, as detailed in *It's Not About the Bike* (Armstrong & Jenkins, 2000), has persisted as a central theme in his cultural popularity. Sparkes (2004, p.424) argues that Armstrong's autobiography "served to confirm and legitimize a number of dominant narratives that circulate within Western culture regarding what constitutes a good illness and self-story in relation to men, in general, and elite athletes in particular". Arthur Frank (1995, p.128, original emphasis) suggests that the 'moral purpose of reading' a book such as Armstrong's tale of cancer survival, "… is *to witness a change of character through suffering*". The public came to admire Armstrong as a human being through his cancer story and it became a way for many to 'affirm' the challenges he faced, which, Frank goes on, is "one sort of moral duty". Frank notes that when the reader identifies with the affirmation of character change through illness, the wounded story-teller becomes a model with moral responsibilities to those who find the story inspirational.

Further comments from Frank are especially helpful in understanding why Armstrong's illness story relates to Radical Orthodoxy, and came to involve 'spiritual' themes, broadly understood. Frank (1995, p.134) states, for example, that "Modernism made the physician … into the hero of illness," because they are of action and "*doing*". Armstrong's illness narrative details the actions of his doctors. Yet, when Armstrong's story is examined over the past 15 years, the efforts through The Lance Armstrong Foundation (now known as and referred to throughout our conversation as *Livestrong*) and his popular image, point to what Frank (p.134) understands as a shift away from modernism (in which doctors were heroes of illness) in that "ill people need to be regarded by … our culture as heroes of their own stories". In relation to our application of Radical Orthodoxy, the nature of Armstrong's illness narrative contains all the "presuppositions of modernity," as his doctors were "persons of action" desperately trying to save Armstrong's life (Frank, p.134). But it is Armstrong who comes to be seen as the *fighter* against cancer as he rides his bicycle for the benefit of others. His survival story came to operate in a unique sense because Armstrong, the individual man, became the hero of action. He is also a moral hero because "conquering illness is itself a cause, and a cause that may supersede the immediate welfare of" the individual (Frank, p. 134). By offering his personal experience of cancer, Armstrong becomes the hero of an illness quest and reflects Zygmunt Bauman's (1998) understanding of a postmodern moral person, oriented to "the life or well-being or dignity of another human being" (Frank, p.134). Armstrong had, until recently, been represented in popular culture as a moral person, characterized and glorified in terms of his savioristic and messianic attributes because of his cancer survival, his physical superiority (now marred) and his Foundations efforts for cancer-related issues. Nonetheless, following Armstrong's 'cloaked' confession to doping (i.e. cheating) in the highly publicised interview by Oprah Winfrey

(January, 2013), the *Times* sports writer, Matthew Syed (2013, p. 26), in the article, *Admit It: You've Enjoyed this Immorality Tale*, describes how historically people have vicariously identified with the 'sporting' and 'illness' narratives of Armstrong:

> Rarely has a story given so much pleasure to quite so many . . . the messianic figure who turned out to be Satan in Lycra . . . In *The Golden Bough*, the anthropologist Sir James George Frazer wrote about the phenomenon of a temporary king. This is someone with all-encompassing rule and flawless character . . . The narrative that surrounds Armstrong (and other modern messiahs) follows this atavistic pattern. His elevation to moral bastion never had any basis in reality. We closed our eyes to his faults . . . we excused his flaws as part of the repertoire of any driven winner. After all the temporary king can only serve his function as a lamb: faultless and without sin. And then we pounced . . . Lance Armstrong is not the first and will not be the last to run the gauntlet of our primal need for a temporary king. We projected our own hopes and anxieties on to the Texan . . . But the satanic parody we are left with today is as partial and one-dimensional as the saintly figure we once revered.

Syed's (2013) description has many thematic affinities with the discourse of Radical Orthodoxy that we will further explore. Recent theological reflections on identify and idolatry have framed sport as an institution that may act as a 'surrogate religion' for participants and fans (e.g., Watson, 2011; White, 2008). Syed's reflections also challenge us to carefully explore our own feelings with regard to Armstrong's attitudes and behavior. In turn, as Ward (2011) notes, as scholars (especially Christian scholars), we need to guard against 'judgementalism' toward celebrity figures, as there is always an unhealthy human tendency to "enjoy an immorality tale", to "moralise" (Syed, 2013, p.26), which is so often driven by our need to feel better about

ourselves. This said, in line with the aim of our essay, it is important to analyze how the 'illness' narrative of Armstrong is so central to his public popularity.

Lastly, one the central tenets of Radical Orthodoxy is to guard against polarizing the world and human activity into the 'secular' and the 'sacred', as has been the case in dualistic (i.e., the Platonic-Cartesian mind-body split) analyses of sport in the past. Rather, the theology of Radical Orthodoxy seeks to glean insights from the social sciences, while remaining true to the epistemological and ontological premises of Christian doctrine. This starting point allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities of sporting experience, and in particular, a story in which the cyclist Lance Armstrong has been 'deified' by many.

ARMSTRONG: THE CANCER SURVIVING HERO-ATHLETE

In the initial *Sports Illustrated* magazine coverage of Armstrong's 1999 Tour de France victory, Karl Haussmann, then director of *Livestrong* said: "this is a guy who we saw with no hair, lying in bed barely able to move after brain surgery, and now he's won cycling's greatest race" (Sports Illustrated, 1999). Local fans left their messages at the front door of *Livestrong* after he won in 1999, one of which read: "Keep rolling Lance, you are an inspiration" (Sports Illustrated, 1999). Those who believe in Armstrong as a result of knowing and identifying with his illness narrative adhere to the mentality of using and trusting in (above all else) medical doctors to help treat their cancer, as is the norm in western culture. As highlighted above, a shift is occurring (or has occurred) toward the personal story of illness as the idealized example of struggle and suffering and offering moral inspiration for others to admire. Armstrong came to be depicted as an exemplar of an ideal 'caring human' because of his charity, which is well evidenced throughout his popular image. As Jewett and Lawrence (1977, p. xx) suggest, the

hero's "superhuman abilities reflect a hope of divine, redemptive powers that science has never eradicated from the popular mind". That said, the well-known ex-Olympic US sprinter, Michael Johnson (2013, p. 53), seriously questions the underlying motivations of the 'caring', 'morally inspiring' and 'selfless' rhetoric that permeates all aspects of the Armstrong media discourse:

> Since his admission [to Oprah Winfrey, January 2013], the debate in the United States about Armstrong has centred on whether or not he should be demonised as he has been, given that he has done so much good in the battle against cancer with his *Livestrong* Foundation. But I wonder what Armstrong's true motivation was for *Livestrong*. It's become evident to most people, and I have seen for some time, that Armstrong needed to be the centre of attention. Raising huge sums of money to aid the fight against one of the leading causes of death in America has served Armstrong's popularity well. *Livestrong* has raised over $470 million (about £297 million) for the fight against cancer, and that is a good thing but should Armstrong get a pass for cheating, misleading fans . . . Does the good that was done by the Armstrong foundation overshadow the bad that was done by his cheating, I don't think so. Most of Armstrong's public life has been a lie . . . the story, the inspiration, the motivation, all of it was a lie . . . Armstrong used his power to destroy the lives of those people who told the truth who accused him of what we now know he did.

Indeed, Armstrong's public image that has turned out to be a facade blurs distinctions between 'science' and 'sacredness', allowing for a uniquely spiritual characterization of his popular image, by individuals that are searching for existential meaning in 'created things' (i.e., idolatry). He credits medical science and doctors, as the reason he survived cancer. As a cyclist, Armstrong is an athlete, reliant and fully dedicated to the application of science and technology

to make him ride faster and longer than his competitors. Yet, because of his human illness narrative, and the media's perpetuation of his survival story and philanthropy, Armstrong in the secular (scientific) realm, seems to have taken on sacred qualities, and thus, he has become a source of human knowledge and an earthly figure - hero-athlete - for others to believe in and follow. This idolization of Armstrong is of course the 'angelic host' that Ward (2011) suggests has become a condition of our secular society, in which humans experience theological emptiness and are desperately yearning (often unconsciously) for experiences of, and a relationship with, God.

Armstrong's embodiment as a transcendent figure has also been perpetuated through his Foundation's efforts. He states through his cancer experience that he felt "a mission to serve others" that, he "never had before, and took it more seriously than anything in the world" (Armstrong & Jenkins, 2000, p.156). Armstrong became the inspirational figure others looked to or thought about when dealing with cancer. Through his efforts, a community with extensive resources has helped millions with cancer related issues. Armstrong's Foundation's efforts put the responsibility of a cancer diagnosis in the hands of the individual, making them the locus of their own struggle with the disease, exemplifying a 'secular turn' or 'nihilism' that Radical Orthodoxy scholars highlight as a condition of modernity. For example, on the *Livestrong* website, video posts of personal cancer experiences can be shared with others; blogs with information are available on a variety of cancer related topics, and there is even a page for doctors detailing how to discuss cancer diagnoses with their patients. Armstrong's illness narrative moved cancer conversations away from religious arenas, and even away from physicians, placing them instead in the hands of the individual; a clear shift in how people understand the nature of their own illness narrative, devoid of divine connection. William Fore

(1993) supports the idea that the outward projection of offering personal sacrifice comes to have religious relevance, stating that "if the religion is to survive, much of their communication must be focused outward – to interact with the culture in which the religion finds itself, to testify, to engage in public testimony, education and mission" (cited in Arthur, 1993, p. 55). In an individualized, self-centered, sport-obsessed culture, many with cancer related illness it seems believe that they can help themselves and others by participating at *Livestrong* and other related events (see King, 2003). In short, the narrative of Armstrong has led others to believe that their illness narrative is 'in their own hands'.

Livestrong's web pages also continue to provide stories about other cancer survivors. Written accounts are continually updated on *Livestrong.com* and come from individuals across the globe who add their story to the growing community. A central theme of these posts is how *Livestrong* helps individuals deal with, beat, and succeed in life after cancer, using Armstrong as the example (though less and less explicitly now). Through these various media personifications Armstrong, the man, comes to embody religiously and spiritually meaningful qualities. People experience Armstrong and his image in their own personal way, taking what they find attractive about their idol, the result of which is an individualized spiritual experience of sorts.

In examining Armstrong's illness narrative and the observable impact it has had on the lives of millions, we must be cautious to not suggest that this sporting demi-god is a source of real spiritual meaning, as it is ultimately a 'spiritually empty narrative', devoid of the supernatural. Perhaps, the weight, the seriousness and wide-ranging deleterious consequences of the doping scandal (e.g., the possibility of cycling losing its Olympic status, see Rutherford, 2013), will lead to Armstrong experiencing a profound 'shudder of identity', as Martin Buber, called it (Aggasi, 1999). A journey of existential 'symbolic death' (in one sense, an 'illness' of

the mind or, an 'identity crisis'), in which he endures the 'hero-to-zero' syndrome that sport psychologists describe when athletes retire, or, experience career-ending injuries (Watson, 2011), and which Barnes (2013b, p. 52) powerfully captures:

> Armstrong is universally seen as the greatest individual cheat in the history of sport . . . But the human cost of this dreadful business is still more dismaying, for after all, what the hell has Armstrong got left? What can a great sport cheats do with the rest of his life? . . . And that, I suspect, is the terrible truth that is haunting Armstrong. He has achieved everything in sport and found that it is worth nothing . . . Armstrong, having survived a terrifying bout of cancer as anyone ever walked away from, must now live the years ahead of him as a cheat with a full CV of bogus achievements. It is an unenviable situation, and one that should not make us gloat.

Indeed, we should not gloat, or we *judge* (Romans 2: 1-3). And from a Christian perspective, when reflecting on Armstrong's existential crisis, we should always be aware of the ever-present possibility of human creatures choosing the deep confession and spiritual redemption that the Christian gospel offers. Or, at least, a road that leads to an honest and candid 'heart-felt' confession and a shift towards freedom from guilt and shame. This is the path that his former team-mate, Tyler Hamilton, chose to walk after suffering serious depression, by testifying and 'unburdening himself' to the Grand Jury. Subsequently, Hamilton's book, *The Secret Race* (Tyler & Coyle, 2012) described the 'sick little circle' that had developed in their cycling team (Dickinson, 2012), yet never selectively denigrated Armstrong. While there is hope, of course, that Armstrong may seek a redemptive path of sorts; through a candid and full testimony, the need to 'protect the self' from "… the terrible truth that . . . He has achieved in sport and found it worth nothing" (Barnes, 2013b, p. 52) may, though, be too much to bear on his soul.

In many ways, it was Armstrong's bout with cancer and his continued philanthropy that makes his athletic achievements greater in the public's eye. As Reynolds (2008, p.13) states "disability is an often overlooked and contested "site" that opens up a range of possible resources and interdisciplinary approaches to the vulnerable and relational character of human existence, bringing to the fore issues of difference, normalcy, embodiment, community, and redemption. For this reason disability has theological power". Because of his spiritually significant illness narrative, Armstrong inspires people to go into the world and make a difference. Armstrong's illness, his disability "… provides a way into more firmly acknowledging and experiencing our deep connections with one another, connections that indicate a basic web of mutual dependence but that all too often becomes obscured by" hegemonic ideals of healthy and able bodies (Reynolds, p.14).

Armstrong continues to be an illustration of the dangers and pitfalls of idolizing sport figures, even those with compelling illness narratives. In turn, we are left with a real theological quandary about human idolatry. Since the revelations of Armstrong's doping activities, we have unfortunately seen him marginalized and alienated. In many ways, he has become a social pariah, where even application to enter into a local Master's swim competition was blocked by administrators at the highest level (Macur, 2013). C.S. Lewis (1997/1952) stated that at the root of idolatry is pride and that pride is in itself, 'divisive'. Perhaps this is how we can understand Armstrong's alienation from others, in that his quest to 'be the centre of attention' (Johnson, 2013), to 'win-at-all-costs' through doping and lying (Watson & White, 2012), has paradoxically led to his alienation within cycling and wider culture. As we move to examine Armstrong's illness narrative through the lens of Radical Orthodoxy, we emphasize that while Armstrong's biography in the sport of cycling is punctuated with moral misdemeanors, he is, according to

Christian scripture, made in the image of God (*imago Dei*). This would suggest that in his failures, as well as his successes, Armstrong (the man) can provide an intimation of God in the world.

RADICAL ORTHODOXY

Thus far we have illustrated how, in the past, Armstrong's popular image was presented to the public in specifically spiritualistic ways and how his philanthropic actions and illness narrative may have served to perpetuate this idolatrous image. There are, however, a few more insights about this theological imagining of Armstrong that Radical Orthodoxy can provide. Graham Ward, Catherine Pickstock and John Milbank (among others) aim to situate theological, social and political discourses in conversations with each other, which they recognize as changing, shifting, and unfolding within the human experience. Radical Orthodoxy has only recently been used to examine sport and sport related issues (e.g., Edgar, 2012; Meyer, 2012; Ward, 2012; Sydnor, 2006), and in a systematic review of literature on sports and Christianity, Watson and Parker (2013) have called for further use of this approach to understand sporting phenomena. While this essay does not explore the many facets of the theology of Radical Orthodoxy, the authors see it as useful for theologically understanding how sports figures with illness narratives might come to have spiritual significance.

Grimshaw (2000, p.89) has argued that as we promote sportspeople as role models, they come to embody ideal types: "This occurs because we misinterpret what occurs in sports, positing sport stars as luminal figures between modernist dualistic assumptions of the real and unreal, or the secular and religious and of the sacred and profane". With this in mind, Graham Ward (1999) suggests that contemporary Western society lacks a fulfilment of God. This "lack

will now foster an eternal longing and will structure our desire for God" (Ward, p.170). Thus, we create in popular culture theologically empty figures (i.e., idols), such as Armstrong, to fill the gaps in the human heart. The notion that spiritual and religious heroic themes can be ascribed to Armstrong is demonstrated in many articles and references about the cyclist, where words such as 'incomparable,' 'superman,' and 'miraculous' are used to describe him. At one Tour Down Under press conference in 2009, Armstrong was referred to in a specific Christian religious metaphor when the reporter states "it's as if Jesus Christ" had returned to cycling (Moore, 2009). Through Armstrong, we see "the crisis of belief experienced in Western post-Christian society" (Grimshaw 2000, p.89), which is a central tenet of Radical Orthodoxy, that is, humans adopting theologically empty figures, such as Armstrong, as a substitute for relationship with God.

Theologically, Radical Orthodoxy also seeks to refocus attention to the importance of God centered academic conversations. Sydnor (2006, p.212) suggests that with Radical Orthodoxy scholarship academic conversations "are not reduced to human disciplines or sciences, but are raised to the level of *theological* reflection, which have redemptive qualities and build analogical worldviews". In this way, using Radical Orthodoxy helps clarify the religious implications of Armstrong's illness narrative. Elsewhere Sydnor (2003, p. 27-28) has stated that "radical orthodoxy leads one to envision sport as a cultural site that may have transformative sacramental qualities in which the effort and discipline of sport can be experienced as purification, sacrifice and immolation". Examining hero-athletes through a theological framework, Forbes and Mahan (2005, p.15) suggest that sport idols, such as Armstrong, may come to be seen as spiritually significant, stating one "approach is to notice that popular culture and traditional religions function in similar ways, providing meaning and helping people cope with life's problems". Thus, alongside *Livestrong,* Armstrong's illness narrative eenhanced his

idolization in popular culture by creating a figure that helped others deal with life and death issues.

Contributors to the initial volumes of Radical Orthodoxy scholarship sought to return to Christian theological understandings of the human condition and argued that the nihilistic circumstances they describe were the result of the secularization of Western culture; a much debated topic (Milbank, Pickstock & Ward, 1999, p.1). We suggest that Armstrong's popular depiction, within this nihilistic condition, is an example of how hero-athletes can come to have spiritual meaning for those drawn to such illness narratives; specifically because of the prominence of the suffering he endured in his own illness and the suffering he was said to endure for others through his athletic aspirations. Milbank (2009, p.54) states that: "In a world dominated by evil and violence, self-offering, to God and others, inevitably involves suffering". Armstrong's illness narrative continually focused on how much he suffered through his own cancer experience and then perpetuated the suffering he submitted himself to (in training and competing through cycling) for the welfare of others with the disease. All of this was to foster the notion that Lance Armstrong was a figure to be revered and *idolized*.

Additionally, Pickstock (2009, p. 277) further elaborates on the view of self-sacrifice and helping others as essential to a Radical Orthodoxy approach, stating "Hence *metaphysical* participation extends to the political domain, ensuring that here a participation in the *social* sense precedes the individual self". This is exemplified through participant involvement at many *Livestrong* events. While the intentions of some participants may be self-centered, an overwhelming majority take part for the purpose of helping others through the sacrifice of their own physical activity (much in the same way that Armstrong has been depicted: e.g., Nike, 2009). Pickstock (2009, p.277) describes how "the people have been restored to themselves in

earthly proximity to one another, after the earlier elevation of desire, they are now ready to receive the sacrament". In this, *Livestrong* participants and those who are inspired by Armstrong's illness narrative, could be said to have experienced the spiritual benefit of the sacrifice of others through physical activity. In a sense it brings them closer to God where the "Christian paradigm for all bodies … are signs of the nullity of things apart from their sharing in the divine gift – a sharing which is specific and yet unlimited" (Milbank, Pickstock, & Ward, 1999, p.13). The problem described in Radical Orthodoxy, is when the figure at the centre of these events is a man and not God. Yet if we recognize that the divine exists in the world, and specifically at *Livestrong* events where thousands gather to help those affected by cancer, God's influence can be present in some way through Armstrong because, as Radical Orthodoxy claims, God is in the world and in each of us (i.e., *imago Dei*). Arguably, this is true despite Armstrong's recent fall from grace and his high-profile confession of cheating. Through these shared experiences, the divine gift, that is specific to each individual and unlimited to how these gifts become manifest, is revealed in the world. As stated above, it would be heretical to elevate any one person to the level of divine because of our creaturely status. Armstrong's fall from such an elevated position (i.e., a global hero-athlete) makes this nuance clear. In this sense however, Radical Orthodoxy offers a theological understanding of how God may work through Armstrong's illness narrative and his experiences. Many admire Armstrong because of his athleticism, which is one of his gifts from God, but this recognition also illustrates the danger of ignoring the divine, and/or exalting, an individual's humanness.

Placing the media characterization of Lance Armstrong in the context of Radical Orthodoxy, and paying attention to Ward's (2000, p.222) question of "how we account for this resurfacing of the Christian imaginary in postmodern culture", Armstrong's illness narrative has

been consumed by many. Ward (223) suggests that a condition of the postmodern "is the manufacture of new urban mythologies, a longing for transcendence, the fabrication of new cosmologies, a desire to become divine …", all of which are found in the characterization of Armstrong as a cancer survivor. While Lance Armstrong is not divine, his popular image has portrayed him as a human ideal (at least until 2012), a figure who erroneously seemed to offer transcendent hope through the accomplishment of surviving cancer and achieving impressive athletic feats.

Radical Orthodoxy scholars argue that it is not necessary to single out or refuse unconventional representations of what has "theological significance" (Milbank, Pickstock & Ward, 1999, p.13). However, it is still important to examine these representations and identify how they reflect the divine 'power-to-transform'. Radical Orthodoxy reminds us that nothing exists without God and each person has unique divine gifts. Armstrong's illness narrative has provided positive benefits for millions of people around the world through direct contributions as well as inspirational motivation. While recent developments in Armstrong's athletic story clearly illustrate his humanness and poor decision-making as a result of his fallen nature, the goodness that has come from his divine gifts cannot be ignored. His specific gifts were to survive cancer and win bicycle races (albeit unethically) in order to promote cancer related issues to help others. In this sense Armstrong's athleticism, cancer survival, and philanthropy reflect the sharing of divine gifts, as articulated in the theory of Radical Orthodoxy. Of course, Armstrong is no different from a firefighter who uses their body to help others, or the school teacher who uses their knowledge to educate others.

Radical Orthodoxy uses theological language and discourse to realize the divine in an effort to overcome a world that continually erases the divine purpose and influence in the world.

Ward (2000, p. 223) repeats Nietzsche's idea that "In the culture of the death of God, we replace him". This erasure itself was a slow transition but has led to the nihilism observed in Armstrong's illness narrative and which Radical Orthodoxy scholars seek to replace. Milbank (1993, p.210) argues that while philosophy helps us to understand our need for the divine in the world, it leaves us wanting for divine answers. French philosopher Maurice Blondel (1893, p.442), who developed a philosophy of action, argues that "without an acknowledgement of the supernatural, our account of reality is incomplete". In turn, Ward (1997, p. xxi-xxii) states that, "The emergence of the postmodern has fostered post-secular thinking," and in this "cultural climate, the theological voice can once more be heard". Of course, this will be a slow transition and difficult for many to grasp. It is important to begin the conversations about how theologians may come to understand the religious and spiritual impact of sport and hero-athletes. This is something that Sydnor (2002, p.26-7) has explored, suggesting that through "our studies and conclusions … we might boldly answer that the developed world's obsession/fascination with … sport-related productions and representations is the result of individual and societal emptiness that is only fulfilled by God". Radical Orthodoxy allows us to read Armstrong's illness narrative in theological terms in an effort to understand why many came to see the cyclist in such a way. It also frames the potential redemptive story that Armstrong's fall from grace may continue to reveal.

CONCLUSIONS

The global participation and interest in sport to some degree demonstrates the universally assumed positive qualities of sporting activity and, as such, sport becomes imbued with moral discourses perpetuated by individual stars. We have argued that hero-athletes assume a demi-god

status, in turn providing existential meaning for those who look to sports for spiritual enrichment. Lance Armstrong, through the formulation of his public image represents such a figure; one who carries inspirational value ideologies and who came to be idolized, as a religious icon, of sorts. Armstrong's illness narrative perpetuated this image of a fabricated idol, a figure that falsely provided a theologically empty social world with spiritual fulfillment. Many found this fulfillment through Armstrong and believed that they had found meaning in their own lives. It has been argued that Armstrong's illness narrative rouses culturally embedded notions of resurrection, inspiration and spirituality, themes which most Christians are familiar with. Armstrong's story of survival also reflects familiar themes of self-sacrifice, redemption, and beneficence, all of which comprise important aspects of the Judeo-Christian moral framework in its broadest sense. The notion of resurrection is especially powerful as a theological theme and is observable in Armstrong's illness narrative (retold again and again). To live beyond a serious illness that often leads to death, is very much a spiritual notion and one which is repeated throughout Armstrong's story. Even theologian Martin Marty (2005, p. 55) wrote in the *Christian Century* that he was consoled to "read Armstrong's advice on how to be humanized," suggesting Armstrong's perpetual reference as transcendent, even for a theologian. As a cancer survivor Armstrong has a unique view of life and death and, in this way, because common religious notions of resurrection and inspiration are part of his illness narrative, we were encouraged to understand the Armstrong phenomenon using a theological framework.

The success and popularity of *Livestrong* has perpetuated Armstrong's image, not only as a cyclist but also as a philanthropic individual. Millions of people are diagnosed with cancer every year around the globe, and billions are affected. Armstrong designed a widely recognized and celebrated foundation, creating a community that has been successful in raising awareness,

providing resources and attracting supporters. Participants in modern forms of popular culture 'write themselves into' these events, "through their activity … wearing costumes, belonging to fan clubs, attending conventions, memorizing lore, and even creating and enacting their own tales", what Mahan (2005, p.288-89) calls a 'surrogate religion'. Those who wished to be included in Armstrong's illness narrative, perpetuated through his philanthropy, reflect what Radical Orthodoxy scholars understand as a religious void, a void that humans typically fill with 'created things'. Therefore, these participants find fulfillment through their personal consumption and association with Armstrong (i.e., idolatry) and his various purchasable items, such as yellow LIVESTRONG bracelets, *Livestrong* clothes, and attendance at *Livestrong* events.

Milbank (1993, p.109) states that religion fulfills certain social and personal needs for all humans and "given this more complex picture, one has to revise the presentation of the way in which "religion" intervenes in "society"'. While Armstrong's illness narrative and subsequent philanthropic efforts reveal him to be a hero-athlete who in some small way "re-enchants" the world with "theological imagery" (Ward, 2000, p.214), we conclude that there is also a pervasive idolatry that characterizes the many dimensions of the Lance Armstrong story, as described above. In recent expert 'reviews' of doping in sport/cycling (Mcnamee, 2013; Miah, 2013), the work of political scientists, sociologists, ethicists and historians is discussed, but there is no mention at all of the spiritual or religious component of this debate. This is even more surprising, when Miah (2013: 3) concludes his essay in saying that '… academics remain uniquely placed to contribute to this debate in critical ways, particularly around the social and moral discussion'. Thus, if we heed Milbank's advice, theologians would be wise to use a Radical Orthodoxy framework to further examine, illness and disability in sporting locales.

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