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A Christian Theological Analysis of the Institutions and Governance of Sport

A Case Study of the Modern Olympic Games

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Abstract

This essay critically examines the institutions of modern sport, specifically the structures and governance of the Modern Olympic Games (1896-present), through a Christian theological lens. We address a range of related issues such as the historical origins and development of modern sporting institutions (which are closely tied to the free-market economy and the professionalization of sport), sin and idolatry, morality in sports practice, governance and administration, and how selectively adopting and synthesizing Marxist and Christian ideas, may further our understanding of power relations in sporting locales. Areas for further research are identified, for example, analysis of the embryonic “sport and peace and reconciliation” literature and a call for more empirical research in the field of sport and religion in general, which has been lacking.

Introduction

Global sport governing bodies proclaim lofty ideals and espouse generic principles that set high moral standards for themselves and others . . . Behind the facades of principled rhetoric is often something quite different . . . a lack of transparency and accountability . . . goes hand in glove with a propensity for corruption . . . sports academics need to take a much more critical approach to the task of researching power relations in world sport (Jennings: 387).

Today what is called sport seems to have become the playground of a particular earth-spirit (Barth: 229).

In the preface to one of the most recent biographies of Eric Liddell, the Olympic Christian athlete (and “muscular Christian” *par excellence*), the ex-Olympian and current Chair of the London Organizing Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (LOCOG) Lord Sebastian Coe, states:

. . . in an era where more heroes and role models are needed . . . Eric Liddell’s . . . decision to sacrifice his strong chance of winning the Olympic Games [1924] blue ribbon 100 metres sprint event because the competition clashed with his Christian beliefs continues to fascinate and capture the imagination . . . and resonates with the vision of the 2012 London Games (Keddie: 12).

Of course, this is not the first time that the positive dimensions of the Olympic and Paralympic games have been noted. Anthropologists, sociologists, and theologians alike have long since identified the Games as a vehicle for the pursuit and demonstration of excellence, the showcasing of “the ritual and the sacred,” and the building of individual, regional, and international relations (e.g., Watson and White 2012; Luo; Haualand; Willimon; Ryken; Vachicouras; Moltman 1989, 1980). Alongside the reflections of Lord Coe, such observations paint a commendable picture but one that is challenged by Baker’s provocative reflections on the modern Olympic institution:

If Christ came to the Olympics, He would be impressed with the quasi-religious aspects of the Olympic rituals and sterling athletic performances on the field, but He would also be uneasy with some less positive features of the Games. He might well be inspired to bring out His whip against the modern scene, for he would most certainly recognise some idolatrous tendencies embedded in today’s Olympism (44).

These are strong words. Yet some scholars have gone so far as to claim that there are irreconcilable differences between the Christian faith and the ideology and praxis of modern Olympism based, as it is, upon an eclectic ideology of muscular Christianity, ancient Greek mythology, pagan ritualism, and social Darwinism (Vondey; R. H. Harker; B. R. Harker). In support of such irreconcilability, theologian Ashley Null (325), contends that the notion of *religio athletae* and the institution of modern Olympia¹ that was at the heart of Pierre de Coubertin’s vision “. . . is completely antithetical to Christian doctrine,” a point that has informed recent scholarship on the Olympic and Paralympic games (325).

Following this line of thinking, Watson and Parker, Watson and White, and Stringfellow (supported by intimations in the theology of Barth and, more recently, Wink and Brueggemann), argue that the institution of modern commercialized sport, including the Olympics, and, to a lesser degree, the Paralympic Games (e.g., Cherney and Lindermann;

¹ Historical caveats in the evolution of the Modern Olympics (1896-present) in Athens are the pre-existence of the Cotswold Olympic Games, founded in 1636 by Robert Dover that lasted for 200 years, and the Much Wenlock Olympic Society founded by Dr. Penny Brook in 1850, who met and collaborated with Baron de Coubertin as he birthed Modern Olympia as we know it (Young 2005a). On the notion of *religio athletae*, see further Parry; Koch; Bailey; Kruger; Tomlinson; MacAloon 2001, 1978; Lucas 1976, 1975, 1964; and Kortzfleisch.

Howe; Gard and Fitzgerald), has come to represent a form of cultural idolatry and, as such, is a major edifice in the modern “tower of Babel” (see J. White). This proposition is based on empirical evidence that self-exaltation, pride, and ruthless competition characterize the modern sporting institution and the ethos of many trans-national sports corporations (see Segart; Silk, Andrews, and Cole), an issue that has been raised by numerous sports ethicists, psychologists, and theologians over the last forty years (see Hamilton; Watson 2011; Hoffman; McNamee; Scanlon; Holowchak; J. White; Watson and White 2007; Higgs and Braswell; Novak; Lasch; Hogan). While it is crucial to recognize that sport has never been entirely free from the vagaries of humankind, not even during the so-called halcyon days of amateur athleticism,² many of the problems have multiplied due, in part at least it seems, to “. . . the ruthless competitiveness that ‘professionalism’ has ushered in” (Cashmore 2010: 473). The aim of this essay is to examine critically the institutions of modern sport, in particular, the structures and governance of the Modern Olympic Games (1896-present), through the lens of Christian theology and related social science perspectives.

The Institution of the Modern Olympics: A Critique

Arguably, the pervasiveness of professionalism, the conceptualization of modern sport as “big business,” and the moral corruption that *partly* characterizes the Modern Olympic games, would have alarmed de Coubertin, a lapsed Catholic with a Jesuit education who described the Olympic model that he championed as a “universal humanistic religion” with the potential to assist in bringing peace to warring nations (Young 2005a). Amateurism, fair play, strength, and the dualistic Greek philosophy of soundness of body and mind, *mens sana in corpore sano* (see Young 2005b), were central to de Coubertin’s vision at the turn of the twentieth century, and yet historical research also demonstrates a range of unhealthy attitudes and social practices that plagued the first four to five decades of the Olympic institution. In a recent essay, Chatziefstathiou identifies these as elitism, exclusionary principles based on “race” and gender, European humanism, and unbridled colonial imperialism. Of course, we now operate in a radically different globalized sport world (Marjoribanks and Farquharson), where some of these issues, such as the exclusion of women, have begun to be positively addressed while others remain.

Since these early beginnings, however, new problems have emerged. These include systematic corruption involving political propaganda, the so-called Nazi Olympics of 1936, the Olympics becoming part of the international cold-war during the 1960s, overt nationalism, doping, human rights abuses (e.g., 2008 Beijing Olympics), and politically-motivated terrorism (e.g., Munich Games of 1972) (see Lenskyj; Close, Askew and Xin; Tomlinson and Young). Pointing to the metaphysical root of many of these problems, Higgs argues that history has shown that “. . . whether communist, democratic, or fascist, modern governments have one thing in common – a reliance on sports to help define and bolster national pride” (179), and, we would argue, national wealth and global status. Consider the Beijing 2008 Olympiad, which has been cast as a strategic political maneuver in China’s emergence as a geo-political super-power (Kidd 2010a; Close, Askew, and Xin). Such

²As Holt and Mason describe, amateurism (or “shamaterism”) was not without its shortcomings in terms of corruption and financial irregularity.

sentiment is supported by a recent empirical study of the Global Sporting Arms Race, which demonstrated a strong correlation between funding (i.e., multi-million dollar packages for individual sports) for elite sports development programs by the governments of Olympic host nations and national sporting success (De Bosscher, Bingham, Shibli, Von Bottenburg, and De Knop). That said, MacAloon advocates that global mega-events such as the Olympics can provide “. . . favourable conditions . . . for difficult meetings” between “. . . global political elites, including . . . nations at war or [those] having no diplomatic relations with one another,” and warns social scientists not to polarize the complex sport-politic dyad in a post-cold-war context (cited in Keys: 254; also see Beacom).

Identifying and combating immoral and inequitable practices within institutions, including those of political origin, is, however, crucial. For Steenbergen, there is a need here to differentiate between sporting “practices” and “institutions,” what he calls that “double character of sport” (48). Drawing upon the work of MacIntyre, Steenbergen’s discussion of the “institutional embeddedness of sport” provides a useful starting point for an analysis of the historical evolution of modern sporting institutions:

Institutions are characteristically concerned with . . . external goods. They are involved in acquiring money and other material goods; they are structured in terms of power and status, and they distribute money and power as rewards. Nor could they do otherwise if they are to sustain not only themselves, but also practices of which they are bearers (48-49).

As Steenbergen suggests, there are powerful centrifugal forces that operate through global political economy that, we contend, endorse and perpetuate undesirable practices within the sport. Indeed, as Higgs and Braswell and others have argued, pride of heart, striving for power, status, and reward are more often than not, seen as virtues in the microcosm of professional sport. Blinded by these deeply entrenched ideologies, American and western sports in general, C. White suggests, have lost their corporate moral compass; we have forgotten, it seems, what is “good” about sport. Examining in more detail how sport as an institution has evolved within the context of modern social history is, therefore, a fundamental pre-requisite if we are to evaluate this cultural phenomenon by way of a Christian worldview.

To understand the evolution and defining characteristics of modern sporting institutions, in this case the modern Olympics, the extensive socio-historical studies of Guttman and Overman are helpful (also see Coleman; Rigauer, especially chap. 14). Guttman elucidates how modern western sports have evolved through the industrial, capitalist, scientific, imperial, and cultural developments of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Utilizing the work of Max Weber, Guttman cites six defining elements of modern sports: (i) secularization, (ii) bureaucratization, (iii) specialization, (iv) rationalization, (v) quantification, and (vi) the obsession with records (1994). Drawing heavily upon Guttman (and thus Weber) and others, (such as the nineteenth century social economist Veblen); Overman provides an in-depth analysis of how the formation of western sports (with a focus on the U.S.) have been shaped by the related forces of the Protestant work ethic, Puritanism, Calvinism, and aggressive free-market capitalism (2011). In Overman’s words, “the Victorian Age gave birth to a . . . phenomenon which dramatically altered the nature of sport and

recreation: the fruition of the spirit of capitalism. Sport has more and more to do with making money . . . The money changers have entered the temple of sport” (1997: 350). Perhaps not surprisingly, such developments have not escaped the attention of academics of a Marxist persuasion, who have identified the urgent need to critique the structures and administration of sporting locales.

Jesus and Marx in the Stadium?

During the 1960s and 70s a group of academics that Kidd (2010b) has labeled the “jockrakers” (i.e., Hoch; Scott; Meggyesy; Brohm) provided trenchant critiques of modern sport as elitist, exploitative, and systematically oppressive. Drawing largely upon the structural Marxist work of the French philosopher Louis Althusser, this radical school of thought came to view sport as a place of racism, militarism, sexism, and class-based domination. Illustrative of this approach, Brohm suggests that “. . . contemporary sport is nothing but an auxiliary structure of imperialist finance capitalism . . . a *new type of industrial sector*” (136-37). Brohm went so far as to entitle a section in his book, “Draft Appeal for the Setting up of an Anti-Olympic Committee” (169-74). As with most neo-Marxist critiques, while helpfully identifying a range of exploitative practices, these authors were, according to Novak, economically deterministic, overly negative, and thus reluctant to consider the playful and potentially religious elements of sport. In his deconstruction of this genre, Novak concludes that “. . . there is no greater sacrilege than politicizing sports . . . sports are deeper than politics” (224-25).

While, in principle, religious scholars may agree with Novak’s reflections on the sacred dimensions of the sporting act, we argue that both the structural Marxist critiques of the 1970s and the cultural-Marxist accounts of more recent years (see Carrington and McDonald; Hargreaves; Gruneau)³ are helpful in shedding light on the capitalist power plays, class inequalities, and political corruption evident in the modern sports institution. For example, the unchecked spending and multi-million-pound deficits that characterize the fiscal strategies of some English and Scottish Premier League football clubs are what Hamil and Walters label “an inconvenient truth” that is more often than not ignored in the quest to “win-at-all-costs” (see also Walsh and Giulianotti). The recent global economic crisis has explicitly demonstrated that divorcing ethics and economics, as has happened in the elite sports business model, is a dangerous occupation. Resonating this truth, the former Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth (and Right Honorable, Lord) Jonathan Sacks, when commenting on the recent Eurozone economic crisis, observes that “ultimately, financial failure is the result of moral failure . . . markets need morals.” Though the majority of Christians may well “reject Marxism for its atheist materialism” (Bancroft: 43), is it not time we might ask, for scholars examining the sport-faith relation to take more seriously such “critical” accounts of the sporting world?

³ While it is difficult to locate sports scholars such as Hargreaves and Gruneau within specific schools of thought, it is fair to say that their use of social history, political economy, and interpretive cultural analysis lends itself to a cultural-Marxist approach based on the work of Antonio Gramsci. For a “classical” Marxist analysis of sport, see Bairner.

Based on the principle that “both Jesus and Marx ask us to consider what the world would be like if we inverted dominant power structures and social practices in the name of justice” (Davis: 20-21), it would seem plausible that theologians could selectively adopt aspects of Marxist theory to help critically appraise economic and class inequalities in modern sports. The degree to which Marxist and Christian ideas should be synthesized has been the topic of a vigorous historical debate that started during the birth of liberation theology in the 1970s (see Howson; Aguilar; Rowland). Amidst a web of complex and counter arguments focusing on socialist ideology, ethics, historical, dialectical, and philosophical materialism, and political tensions between the “secular left” and “religious right,” it is on epistemological and ontological issues where there remains “a gulf between theists and Marx” (Bancroft: 65). Therefore, if Christian sport scholars choose to dialogue with Marx they must carefully unpick and integrate theory, while holding fast to ontological, epistemological, and anthropological theism (see Denis; Lasch; Lyon; Miranda), thus guarding against a dilution or marginalization of the gospel message, in trying to stimulate “social action” – a key criticism and suspicion of the “social gospel movement” during the early part of the 20th century.

Notwithstanding the potential insights that may be drawn from critical analyzes of the sporting world, we argue that input from systematic and biblical theologians is crucial if we are to understand the complex phenomenon of commercialized sport in the twenty-first century. The eroding forces of western secularization (a much debated topic) on religious thought (Taylor) and thus sports (Guttman 1994) has led to a general disregard for spiritual and religious issues in sports-based research. Pound, a notable Olympics scholar and administrator, recently provided a research agenda for Olympic reform. Of the 42 questions that he proposed, none addressed spirituality or religion. This neglect is mirrored in a recent historical overview of “international relations in sport” that fails to mention religion or spirituality (see Keys) and the *Routledge 2012 Olympics Collection* that comprises 40 journal special editions from a range of disciplines but none from theology or religious studies.⁴ In light of the fact that all major Christian denominations wholeheartedly engaged with the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games through the organization, More than Gold (see Hawkins), and that numerous Olympic able-bodied and Paralympic athletes are Christians (see Weir), these omissions and oversights provide cause for concern. In this sense, the provocative questions posed by Staalset on such matters seem valid:

Christian worship and Olympic games – do they belong together? What has the Olympic “culture of winning” to do with “by grace alone”? Are we trying to Christianise a heathen myth? Has the Christian Church an “Olympic cause,” or are we only after a place in the sun? (1).

Provocative, yes, but perhaps these questions are a little too dichotomous and simplistic and may thus lead to overly negative conclusions and an outright rejection of the Olympic idea, which would benefit no one. Reflecting on the London 2012 games, Watson and White

⁴ A caveat to this point is that the Routledge collection commissioned this project in conjunction with the 2012 International Convention on Science, Education and Medicine in Sport, Glasgow, Scotland (July 19-24, 2012), which had a Sport and Religion strand, organized by Professor Mike Collins, University of Gloucestershire, U.K.

alternatively suggest that whilst there are many corrupting influences in the modern Olympic institution that do not sit comfortably with the tenets of the Christian faith and are in need of redemption, there are, at the same time, many positives that Christians should celebrate and engage with (2012). For example, the display of human excellence and beauty in sporting movement (i.e., aesthetics), the coming together of peoples from diverse backgrounds, and the heavily debated notion of “Legacy” (e.g., Gold and Gold; Weed, Cored, and Fiore) in regard to the projected social, environmental, health, cultural, and economic benefits promised by LOCOG. Further research of the many positive and negative aspects of the institutions of sport, such as the Olympic and Paralympic Games, will continue to be important, as the global sport machine continues to gather momentum.

Further Research

A further research question includes how has the historical shift from a rehabilitative-participatory model of disability sport to an elite performance model that is more-and-more frequently mirroring the “win-at-all-costs” culture of able-bodied professional sport, influenced ethical practice in the modern Paralympic institution (see Howe; Gard and Fitzgerald)? Feminist theologians could explore how the Olympic institution (and others, such as FIFA) that is often criticized for its patriarchal structure and governance, explicitly or implicitly inculcates the sexualization of women in the media (see Bruce, Hovden and Markula; Markula; Billings)? Are modern sporting institutions, such as the Olympic, Paralympic Games and the eXtreme Games (see Rinehart), modern idols amongst others that, as Timothy Keller has identified are sources of ultimate existential meaning and thus objects of worship for many participants and fans (see Watson 2013, 2012, 2007; J. White; Stringfellow)? How might theologians and the Church address the institutionalization of violence, bigotry, and hatred between sports clubs and organizations (see, for example, Sugden and Barnier; Lawrence; Kelly; Flint and Kelly; Flint and Powell; Bradley; Giulianotti and Gerrard), such as that evidenced by the historical unrest between the two Scottish football teams Glasgow Rangers and Glasgow Celtic (see Cook; Reid)?

An area within sports studies that may prove particularly fruitful for theologians to explore is the “sport and peace/reconciliation sector” (or international development studies) that, to date, has been largely dominated by political science and social policy research. There are, however, clear conceptual links to Christian theological concepts such as “peace-making” and “reconciliation” that theologians have addressed in numerous global contexts (e.g., Kim, Kollanti and Hoyland), apart from sporting locales. In addition to the United Nations’ article, “Sport for Peace and Development,” a number of well-funded international organizations have been established such as the Laureus: Sport for Good Foundation (2000), the John Paul II Foundation for Sport (2010), and Peace and Sport: Together, Building Sustainable Peace through Sport (2007). There have also been recently established academic centers of excellence such as the Centre for the Study of Peace and Sport at the University of Tennessee (2012), which has a Christian foundation, and the Centre for Peace and Reconciliation Studies at Coventry University, U.K. (1999), which has a growing focus on disability sport.

There is also significant literature from the discipline of sport development that concentrates on how the Olympic movement (e.g., Spaaij and Burleson; Guest; Parry) and

sport more generally, can be utilized as a tool to promote peace and reconciliation in conflict-torn nations such as Israel, the Balkans, Northern Ireland, and Africa (e.g., see Jarvie 2013, 2011; Sugden 2013, 2008; Darnell; Giulianotti and Armstrong; Levermore; Giulianotti; Garratt; Kidd and Donnelley; Shields and Bredemeier), help combat HIV/AIDS (Banda; Lindsey and Banda), and tackle and alleviate human rights abuses (e.g., Kidd 2010a). A handful of scholars (mainly neo-Marxist) have dissented from this viewpoint, arguing that “as a new spiritual authority guiding souls, sport is the total contemporaneous social myth that has enlisted politics and international relations in its service”; in short, the “sport peace” rhetoric is a smokescreen for power politics (Redeker: 499).

Indeed, selectively adopting aspects of Marxist theory, Christian scholars should carefully analyze the underlying political and economic motivations of such initiatives. However, with the consensus of opinion regarding the “sport-peace” nexus being largely positive, we argue that the research agenda within this area is open to exploration and that if appropriately thought through could lead to significant practical changes in sporting locales. For example, what do the concepts of “peace” and “reconciliation” mean in Christian theological terms? How can Churches, governments, the governing bodies of sport (i.e. the Olympics, Paralympics, and Special Olympics) collaborate on sports projects to bring about sustained reconciliation and peace in areas of conflict? One example could be to fund and support initiatives that provide sporting events for the marginalized in society and attempt to increase their social capital such as, for example, the “Homeless World Cup” (see Sherry, Karg, and O’May).

Conclusions

Our aim within this paper has been to highlight the disparity between the values underpinning the ideals of the Olympic movement and those of the modern sporting world. In so doing we have acknowledged that modern sport has been historically plagued by the vagaries of human nature and that as a representation of cultural idolatry its defining features appear to sit less and less easily with formal religion of any kind. What this means in terms of the relationship between sport and Christianity is that as the bonds between these two cultural entities become more entwined the values and practices of “big-time” sport inevitably lead to a series of emergent ethical dilemmas for Christian sports practitioners and advocates alike. The ultimate question, it seems, is not are sport and Christianity compatible bedfellows, but rather to what extent can and should the Christian church impact the moral crisis evident in modern-day commercialized sport and, moreover, how might such an undertaking be carried out.

One of the ways in which this task may be approached, we have argued, is for religious studies scholars and theologians to look more closely at broader (social science) analyses of sport in order to discern the nature of the power inequalities that exist and the various academic critiques and ideas that might be consulted and adopted in response. We have also argued (Watson and Parker 2013) for a widening of the research agenda in the sport-religion field, so as to encourage the undertaking of a greater range of empirical work around these issues so that a more tangible sense of their depth and complexity might be ascertained. Ultimately, it is hoped that such research findings will facilitate not only further reflection on the ways in which the underpinning principles of the Christian faith might allow us to

consider and challenge the values and practices of modern day sport, but also how they might enhance the way in which we view the future of sport both in terms of its participatory and structural formation.

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