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Watson, Nick J. and Brock, Brian (2015)
Christianity, boxing and mixed martial arts : reflections on morality,
vocation, and well-being. *Journal of religion and society*, 17.

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Christianity, Boxing, and Mixed Martial Arts

Reflections on Morality, Vocation, and Well-Being

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Abstract

This essay provides a theological analysis of two violent combat sports, boxing and mixed martial arts (MMA, also known as cage fighting). The titles of the biographies of a number of well-known professional Christian boxers, such as *God in My Corner* (Foreman) and *Humble Warrior* (Holyfield) and the fact that “roughly 700 churches in the United States have begun incorporating MMA into their ministry in some capacity” (Borer and Schafer: 167) raises a host of ethical quandaries and seeming paradoxes for the theologian. However, aside from a handful of essays in popular literature, there is to our knowledge very little academic theological reflection on boxing and MMA. After giving a brief history of boxing and MMA, the essay provides a theological ethical critique and assessment, providing suggestions as to how Christians and churches should think about these activities and how they can advise others.

Key Words: boxing, mixed martial arts, Christianity, morality, well-being

Introduction

The boxer’s job is to injure, maim, and render his opponent unconscious. Indeed, if the opponent dies from his injuries, it simply means that the fighter who hit him was very good at landing punches where they are most likely to do the most damage (Patmore, 1979, cited in Kerr: 42).

I pray for my opponents before fights . . . God gives us talents and I’m using mine to the best of my ability . . . It gives me strength to know that if God is in my corner then no one

can beat me . . . I use religion as a strength not a weakness, and it helps me. I do my training and then he does his bit . . . I've a wife and two kids to provide for and if that means killing you in the ring, that's what I will have to do (Heavyweight boxer, Tyson Fury, cited in Gore: 7).

The provocative titles of the biographies of a number of well-known professional Christian boxers, such as *God in My Corner* (Foreman), *Knocking out the Devil* (Svab), and *Holyfield the Humble Warrior* (Holyfield), raise a host of ethical quandaries and seeming paradoxes for the theologian. However, a recent review of literature on sports and Christianity (Watson and Parker) found that aside from Phil Shirley's insightful popular book, *The Soul of Boxing*, based on interview data with some of the world's most well-known boxers who hold religious beliefs (e.g., Tyson, Holyfield, Watson), academic literature on this topic is sparse.

Hillman's essay on the morality of boxing published in *Theological Studies* and a short chapter on pastoral dilemmas of the sport (Leone and Leone), appear to be the only offerings in academic forums to date. That said, an essay by the distinguished Catholic moral theologian, Richard McCormick, in *Sports Illustrated* and more recent reflections by Gordon Marino (2014, 2013, 2010, 2003), a professional boxing trainer and professor of philosophy, are essential reading. These writings are also complemented by a range of brief and yet thoughtful examinations of theological issues in boxing (e.g., Watson and Brock; Gore; Galli), and more recently, mixed martial arts (MMA) (e.g., Watson and Bolt; Blakely; Carter, Kluck and Morin; Schneirderman), published in periodicals, news media, and blogs. In sum, however, theological ethicists have yet to seriously address the apparent oxymoron of the "Christian boxer or mixed martial artist."

Accordingly, Schwarze recently noted that he had been unable to ". . . track down a good essay presenting a Christian case against MMA . . . but it may be worth spending some time to work through this issue properly" (1). Considering that approximately 700 churches in America have begun to integrate MMA into various ministry-streams (Blakely), we aim to begin to address Schwarze's proposal.

Whilst acknowledging significant differences in the historical development, governance, and physical and structural characteristics of boxing and MMA, as this is an exploratory analysis, they will be examined together in this paper. This is based on the premise that both sports can be differentiated from other violent/dangerous sports (such as ice hockey, rugby, horse racing, snow sports, sky-diving, etc.) by the fact that within the rules, inflicting physical violence on your opponent is the primary (but not exclusive)¹ *goal* rather than the *means* by which another end is reached – winning the game. For example, while a rugby player may be seriously injured by being tackled (or tackling), within the rules of play the task that advances one's position *within the terms of the game* is stopping the other player from advancing into your

¹ We acknowledge that the purpose of boxing and MMA may not *solely* be physical violence; there may also be a mutual quest for excellence (the Latin root meaning of competition in sport; see Watson and Parker), in which opponents honor and respect one another by trying to bring the best out of each other. This is often demonstrated in post-fight embraces and honorable words spoken of one's opponent in pre- and post-fight media interviews.

team's territory. This is why fouls exist for acts that display intent to injure an opponent beyond what would be necessary in terms of game play. Though such penalties exist in both boxing and MMA (outlawing biting, for instance), the centrality of the spectacle of violence in the appeal of the sport to spectators suggests that these penalties are designed to curb the most egregiously damaging acts. The rules thus essentially protect the reputation of the sport and do so by setting a maximum threshold to the violence that can be exacted on athletes.

Given the ineradicable centrality of violence in boxing and MMA, which is highlighted by comparing them with other sports that include violence, such as rugby, and the well-documented risks of traumatic brain injury, concussion, irreversible neurologic dysfunction, eye injuries, psychiatric conditions, and death, has led the British Medical Association (and other medical bodies) to repeatedly call for a ban on these activities (BMA; McCrory; White). Indeed, commenting on the mounting evidence of American footballers in the National Football League who suffer brain damage, as in boxing, social commentator Krattenmaker suggests this is a clear "moral thorn" for Christians. Our task, then, is to wrestle with this, and related ethical questions, in four themed sections: (i) boxing: a brief history (ii) mixed martial arts: a brief history (iii) a theological ethical critique and assessment of boxing and MMA, and (iv) to conclude with some suggestions of what our analysis suggests for the future. The first two sections provide a historical, social and theoretical framework and context that will set us up to parse which of the following three theses is most defensible from a Christian theological perspective:

- i. Boxing and MMA are immoral and, thus, are not appropriate or helpful for humans (with Christian belief) to participate in or watch.
- ii. Boxing and MMA are immoral and, thus are not appropriate or helpful for humans (with Christian belief) to participate in or watch; however, within "God's economy"² these activities may engender *some* moral goods (such as positive character development and healthy civil engagement = social harmony, etc.).
- iii. Boxing and MMA are valid and appropriate activities as they are a means of character and gender development in the spirit of "muscular Christianity" as well as the development of positive values and healthy civil engagement, which may lead to crime reduction and social cohesion and harmony.

We provide a relatively extensive bibliography from across the disciplines to equip scholars for further exploration of these issues. The need to provide historical, social, and theoretical background information prior to our ethical analysis is clear: "sport related violence" is described by Young as ". . . potentially harmful acts that cannot be easily be separated from the sports process and that only begin to make sense when the socially, culturally and historically embedded character of sport is closely scrutinized" (4).

² Where we use the term "God's economy" we are referring generally to God's self expression in history, through the values and moral goods of humanity (and thus, the Holy Spirit). This rendering of the term means that in the complexity and messiness of human life, certain activities, such as boxing and MMA, may involve questionable motivations on behalf of the participants/spectators, result in harmful/sinful/immoral outcomes and manifest Christian moral goods.

Boxing: A Brief History

Archaeological artifacts in the form of stone representations found in the Middle East and dated around the fifth century BCE portray pugilist activities, that is, men fighting with hand wrappings (Brasch). Hand-to-hand combat in the form of boxing was also a popular sport for the ancient Greeks and Romans, often arranged around public holidays, festivals, and funeral services. In addition to Olympic boxing (688–369 BCE) the ancient sport of the pankration (“the all-power thing” or “total force”) was arguably the most well-known activity of the ancient world in which participants could use a mixture of boxing and wrestling skills to “. . . beat one’s opponent into submission or death” (Spivey: 10).

Considering that virtually any form of violence was permitted in ancient competitive bouts, aside from biting and eye-gouging, their family resemblance to modern MMA is clear, and this point will be further elaborated upon. Suffice to say, boxing (and the pankration) for the ancients was a brutal and savage affair with virtually no rules, regulations, weight classifications, or consideration of the sacredness and dignity of the human person – the opponent and victim of physical violence.

The ancient Olympic events of boxing and the pankration were eventually banned due to their denigration into “. . . murderous gladiatorial combats” (Brasch: 5). This decision emanated principally from the Christian emperor Theodosius and was strongly supported by early Christian and Jewish writers, including Tertullian, Philo of Alexandria, and Chrysostom (Poliakoff), who argued against the barbaric violence perpetrated in these so-called sports. Aside from the medieval schools of dueling and swordsmanship that sometimes included elements of pugilistic training, boxing as a sport and form of public entertainment did not again emerge until the seventeenth century in England, and was called “prize-fighting” (often bare-knuckle).

Most historical accounts of the birth of modern boxing identify James Figg as its founder. A renowned prize-fighter, Figg had an entrepreneurial streak in that he saw a need for less lethal means to settle disputes (than via sword and pistols) and to entertain the gentry and aristocrats (Murphy and Sheard). Another boxing pioneer was Jack Broughton who in 1747 drafted the first written rules of the sport and capitalized on the vicarious entertainment the sport provided for the upper classes. As Murphy and Sheard note, “. . . by present standards boxing was an extremely violent and bloody activity in this period” (42). A whole host of socio-cultural determinants impacted the development of modern boxing in the next two hundred years (see Sheard; Johnes and Taylor; Boddy; Sugden), but it was not until 1880 that the Amateur Boxing Association (ABA) was formed. The professionalization and institutionalization of boxing (one of the first sports to have professional athletes) was then cemented by the administration of the Queensbury Rules in 1865. Essentially, these regulations paved the way for boxing as we know it in Europe and America: the use of gloves and timed rounds; weight classifications; a point system that included penalties for low blows, head-butting, and holding; and eventually the provision of groin-protectors, gum-shields and head-guards (Murphy and Sheard). The increasing popularity of boxing in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century quickly attracted the attention of religious groups, who were the first of many anti-boxing lobbyists to emerge and aggressively call for the abolition of boxing.

Advances in medical knowledge during the 1920s increased the empirical data by which the devastating effects of boxing on the human body could be demonstrated, including serious injury/disablement and death (Mainwaring and Trenerry; Shurley and Todd; McCrory). This evidence caused the heated debate between lobbyists for and against the sport to intensify, not least following the death or disablement of a number of well-known professional fighters. Interestingly, many within the Catholic and Jewish faith (Dee; Berkowitz; Gems 2004, 1993) have been explicitly supportive of boxing, primarily as a form of inculcating social control and character development (i.e., discipline, self-respect, work ethic, etc.). This idea has been the focus of a range of recent studies and political initiatives that explored if, and how, combat sports, such as boxing and MMA, are linked to criminality and anti-social and pro-social behavior (for example, Salter and Tomsen; Jenkins and Ellis; Rutten et al.; Endersen and Olweus). The most illustrative example of how Catholic and Jewish leaders have championed boxing is in late nineteenth and early twentieth century America.

A melting-pot of immigrant groups at the lower end of the socio-economic scale – European Jews, Italians, Irish, African-Americans, and Hispanics – lived together mainly on the eastern seaboard in cities such as New York and Boston. Urban squalor, overcrowding, ethnic rivalry, labor competition, and gang warfare often characterized male immigrant life. Catholic clergy and Jewish rabbis actively developed boxing clubs and ran competitions as a healthy alternative to help counter social ills (see Koehlinger; Gems 2004, 1993). In the twenty-first century these ideas are still deeply embedded in the boxing-religion discourse. For example, George Foreman, the former heavyweight world champion boxer, Christian minister and founder of the George Foreman Youth Center, seems adamant that boxing, “. . . makes young people less violent” (Marino 2014: 57).

Social scientists across disciplines have examined many issues such as class, race, gender, conceptions of the heroic, embodiment, and media representations within the sport of boxing (Heiskanen; Rhodes; Wacquant; Woodward; Oates; Radford; Cashmore; Marqusee; Jefferson), much of which has its roots to some degree in the historical period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The appeal of the “Great White Hope” in boxing, a gender and class issue in America and the UK, is closely linked to the popularity and media coverage of the sport. This is interesting since the attraction and popularity of boxing in America is on the decline, which has been attributed to the exponential increase in popularity of MMA and the “. . . success and prescience of White champions” in this sport (Rhodes: 354), a professional sport that only emerged in 1993.

Mixed Martial Arts: A Brief History

Prior to the development of MMA in the early 1990s, boxing had long held the title of the most violent and controversial sport. Spencer (2011), an MMA fighter and academic sociologist, provides a concise explanation of the activity itself, its growth as an institutionalized sport, and challenges the claim that boxing is the most violent sport:

A new and equally violent and taxing sport has emerged that challenges this conception. MMA competitions feature competitors in a ring or caged-in area, inflicting pain on their opponents, by punching, kicking, elbowing, and kneeing their opponents into submission. While only men participated in

MMA competitions, women now enter into these contests. Countries within Europe, North and South America, and Asia regularly host MMA competitions. Ultimate fighting championship (UFC) in the United States, Canada, and Great Britain draws crowds of 20,000 or more, in addition to millions of televised viewers worldwide.

Globally, MMA seems to have “arrived,” and Spencer states that it has now eclipsed boxing in popularity. MMA incorporates a plethora of techniques from different traditional Asian martial arts that have permeated western culture (judo, wrestling, Ju Jitsu) and boxing. The etymology of “martial arts” (from the Latin) is “arts of Mars,” the Roman God of War (Carter, Kluck and Morin). Preparation for war has historically been the remit of martial arts pursuits, but westernized forms of martial arts have been adapted as recreational and competitive activities.

The first “regulated” MMA league first emerged in 1980 in America and was imaginatively called, “Tough Guy Contest”! Over the following decade this name was changed to “Battle of the Superfighters.” Fights were sanctioned in Pennsylvania, but later prohibited by the State Senate due to concerns with the perceived barbarity of the events (Nash). It was not until 1993 that the *Ultimate Fighting Championship* (UFC) was founded and the sport got a major foothold (some may say a spiritual stronghold) in the male public psyche and the media (which subsequently developed into a sport for female participants and spectators).

As the popularity of MMA in its raw form (no-holds-barred) mushroomed in America, a number of political figures called for a nationwide ban of the sport. Labelling UFC events as “human cockfighting,” a “blood sport,” and “bloodbath,” Senator John McCain was the most vociferous in his moral condemnation, and this led the administrators of the sport to introduce new regulations that, ironically, led to the further legitimization and growth of the sport. “The basic nature of the fights has not changed. The purpose of cage fighting is still to punch, kick, and pound a man or woman into submission” (Carter, Kluck and Morin: 1). The infliction of intentional physical violence has led to a growing body of medical literature (alongside that for boxing) that demonstrates the ever-present risk of serious injury and disablement (Ngai, Levy and Hsu; Seidenberg). This evidence has led medical authorities (such as the British Medical Association) to lobby for an outright ban on MMA and boxing (White).

As to the many socio-cultural variables surrounding MMA, it is Spencer’s (2012, 2011, 2009) phenomenological ethnographic work that is arguably most notable, addressing notions of gender (especially hegemonic muscularity), narratives of pain, loss, and injury, embodiment, (homo) eroticism, racism, morality, and violence. Other academic analyses of this sporting phenomenon have begun to emerge. Figurational (process) sociologists Garcia and Malcolm and Van Battenburg and Heilbron have examined the historical origins of MMA (and violence) in light of Elias’ “civilizing process” and theory of “sportization” (i.e., codification and rule development). To our knowledge, however, the only academic research of Christianity, violence, and MMA is Borer and Schafer’s recent study that explored the internal conflict that Christian MMA spectators (fans) experience in watching such a violent activity. The authors contextualize this research within the American “culture wars” and

analyze Internet data from the confessional accounts of open discussions on blog entries, using key search phrases as “Christian UFC,” “Christian MMA,” and “Violence Christianity.” The key aim was to identify how self-defined Christians and MMA enthusiasts have sought out “. . . nuanced ways to address the internal conflict between their religious beliefs and their leisure practices” (Borer and Schafer: 165). One blogger’s comments (cited in Borer and Schafer: 177) display one of the most obvious theological lacunae that has generated the bulk of the theological confusion around the sport: that any activity, even if considered immoral, can be defended as a strategy for evangelistic mission:

While beating another’s face may not be the “Christian thing to do”, what we have to realize is that Christians are a minority in a secular world. We are called to preach the Gospel everywhere. Be it pro wrestling, MMA fighting . . . it’s up to you to bring Christ to the one next to you.

The research of Borer and Schafer is important in the context of this essay in provoking the question of why violent entertainment is so appealing both to fans (Guttman) and participants, irrespective of their Christian beliefs (or lack thereof). This brief survey of the historical and social development of boxing and MMA has indicated some of ethical problems that attend it, and we turn now to offer a theological ethical critique and assessment.

A Theological Ethical Critique and Assessment

Past analyses of the morality of boxing (and other violent sports) by sports ethicists have been dominated theoretically and philosophically by traditional arguments surrounding issues of paternalism and autonomy (Dixon; Simon; Schneider and Butcher; Parry). The conclusions and recommendations offered in this small corpus of work predictably spans the paternalism-autonomy spectrum, while typical practical suggestions are to: (i) restrict or ban blows to the head; (ii) stipulate compulsory use of head-guards, which ironically has been shown to be generally ineffective in protecting from brain damage (BMA); and (iii) better educate boxers and coaches as to health risks.

Sociologists and psychologists have also presented a wide-range of theories to explain the multiple dimensions of violence in sport and, in particular, boxing and MMA (see Young; Kerr; Burstyn; Guttman; Messner). These writings explore the complexities between definitions and explanations of assertion, aggression, and violence and the diverse sociological, psychological, economic, and historical variables that have moderated the acceptance, ritualization, institutionalization, and celebration of violence in sports. A hyper-masculine ideology, to take one example, has been a pervasive characteristic of sports such as boxing and MMA (Burstyn). Eller summarizes a huge body of social scientific literature on violence and finds that it falls neatly into two schools of thought which also orient the approaches on display in the academic literature on this topic:

The two most general perspectives are the “internal” and the “external” – that is, whether the cause or source of violence is “inside” the violent individual (in his head or her “mind” or personality or genes) or “outside” the violent individual (in the social situations, values structures in which he or she acts). These two overarching perspectives correspond roughly to biology

and psychology on the one hand and sociology and anthropology on the other . . . (31).

The social science literature that has examined violence in sport has been extremely helpful in contextualizing our discussion. In particular, previous work from the disciplines of sociology, psychology, secular ethics, and history have provided an historical and conceptual foundation on which to ask ethical questions from a Christian theological standpoint. We now turn to the discipline of theological ethics for insight into the apparent oxymoron of the “Christian boxer or mixed martial artist.” The following narrative provides a provocative start point:

The boxer Manny Pacquiao is a devout born-again Christian. He has earned world titles in eight weight divisions and was anointed “Fighter of the Decade” by the Boxing Writers Association of America. Before a recent bout, I pressed Pacquiao about the apparent conflict between his devotion to the God-man who insisted that we turn the other cheek and his concussive craft. There was a silence. I was worried that I stepped over the line and said, “I’m sorry if I offended you with that question.” The Pac Man responded, “No it is a good question. I think it is wrong that we try to hurt one another, but I also think that God will forgive us (him and his opponent) because it is our calling.” I could have pushed, “But why would God give you a calling that was sinful?” but instead I back-peddled and left it at that – that is, at ambivalence (Marino 2014: 57).

Pacquiao’s comment expresses a familiar vague awareness of the resistance to a straightforward embrace of violence that has characterized the Christian tradition, mixed with outright misunderstandings of that tradition. It thus offers an opportunity to revisit Christian thinking about many of the issues involved, in order to develop a more nuanced theological account of the contemporary activities of boxing and MMA.

It is a sign of Pacquiao’s worldview having been shaped by the narratives and practices of the Christian community that he not only openly presents himself as a Christian, but also confesses that, “it is wrong that we try to hurt one another.” Such a belief has traditionally grown from the Christian sense of the value of human bodily integrity growing from the confession of God as a Creator who has created all things good. Christians confess that their bodies and lives are therefore not their own but are to be used to God’s glory, to be lived with (and suffered with) when they give us problems, or, when we even wish to be rid of them. Our own bodies are divine gifts to us, to be received with gratitude and solicitude (Barth: 324-64; Hauerwas 2001). Recognizing the profound ways in which gratefully attending to one’s body shapes one’s own life, teaches Christians what it means to respect the bodies God has given to others. It is this recognition that has traditionally grounded the inviolable prohibitions elaborated in civil and criminal laws (such as in the assessment of penalties for maiming others), as well as many other realms of human life. In the middle ages, for instance, setting concrete limits to how vigorously one could pursue corporeal punishment of prisoners, slaves or children (Aquinas: II-II q. 65 a. 2).

Since one of the premier designations of the coming messiah is the “prince of peace” (Isaiah 9:6), readers of the New Testament have been puzzled by Jesus’ using a whip to clear

the Temple (John 2:15) and his comment that “the one who has no sword must sell his cloak and buy one” (Luke 22:36; cf. Matthew 10:34). Passages like these, along with Old Testament depictions of godly warriors in Israel provoked long-running debates among Christians around the question of the appropriate Christian stance toward violence. Is Jesus’ statement that “those who live by the sword will die by the sword” (Matthew 26:52) a prohibition of Christian involvement in violence, or a description of what will happen if they do? This paper is not the forum in which to recount the various arguments on both sides of this discussion (see Yoder 2009a). Our aim here is to explain why, theologically speaking, we cannot discuss boxing and MMA without situating it in the much longer Christian tradition of thinking about the problem of legitimate violence, known as the just war tradition. In this tradition constraints were placed on violence by believers who sought to explain how those who confess allegiance to a Prince of Peace, whose reign supervenes on all worldly rulers, could ever be involved in killing or violence toward other humans.

Though he was by no means the first to think about these issues, Augustine is considered the founder of this tradition because his answer remains the basis of mainstream Christian understandings of just war: because *every* Christian is in *every action* called to love the neighbor, no violence against, or killing of other humans can ever be justified, a prohibition prominently enshrined in the ten commandments (Exodus 20:13; Augustine: I.20-21; XIX.5-6). Because human societies can never be just, if violence and vengeance are pursued by private parties, the fact that some will commit violence against others needs to be dealt with by the rightful political authorities who, the New Testament informs us, are divinely sanctioned to deploy violence (Romans 13:1-7). That Paul links this authority with the sword seems to imply that political authorities have the theologically sanctioned right even to use lethal violence (O’Donovan: 101-24). Augustine’s conclusion is that there is no basis for Christians to engage in violence, or killing, unless they are part of the government of a society, which can deploy violence and is committed to doing so only in order to stop the strong preying on the weak – that is, such a government deploys violence only out of love for the victimized neighbor. Based on his theological reading of the whole of the Christian scriptures, Augustine thus concluded with the demand that any Christian engagement in violence be defended as an act of love for my neighbor.

This brings us back to Pacquiao’s assertion that boxing was his calling and so his sin of wishing to hurt his neighbor would be forgiven. The sentiment again betrays significant Christian formation; this would indeed be an answer that Christian soldiers throughout the ages of Christendom would often have given when asked about the theological status of their desire to kill and maim. At best, the Christian soldier could hope to engage in battle in the course of prosecuting a war that was genuinely to protect the innocent from the avaricious aggression, and to do violence to enemies that was commensurate with Christian love – that is, which did not fall into bloodlust, rape, pillage, and wanton pleasure in destruction. To the extent that Christian soldiers undertook violence in this way, they were entitled to pray for forgiveness, not for murder (because killing by an authorized authority would not constitute murder) but for having not done so in ways that embody a spirit of Christian love. Whatever we make of this position, and it is certainly hard for most of us to imagine, it has been the default theological framework within which Christian soldiers through the centuries have assessed the moral defensibility of their actions, and who could at

least understand their moral dilemmas about deploying violence as a legitimate, if difficult, part of embracing the vocation of the soldier – a vocation that was ultimately justified by scripture and a long theological tradition.

The same cannot be said of Pacquiao, who seems at least implicitly to be claiming this tradition for himself as a boxer. This raises the question of whether or not he is warranted in calling his participation in such sports a vocation. The term vocation has a long and complex history, which is again too long to recount here (see Ramsey: 153-90). It must suffice to say that a sphere of human activity can be called one's vocation, as Augustine insisted, only if the Christian can defend it as a legitimate contribution to the life of our neighbors, and to do so on the basis of the Christian creeds, in which the core emphases of scripture have been encapsulated. Prophets, priests, kings, mothers and fathers, farmers, cooks, craftspeople, pastors, and teachers – these are all social roles which have almost universally been understood by Christians through the centuries as legitimate vocations, the term “vocation” being verbally derived from “calling.” Given their seemingly inextricable enmeshment in immoral activities, actors, gladiators, magicians, mediums, soothsayers, thieves, abortionists, and prostitutes have through the majority of Christianity been denied any claim to calling their activity a vocation in Christian terms. Such activities were never understood to have a legitimate claim to be recognized as activities to which God might ever call any believer. The claim that a given pursuit might earn one a pay check, or even serve a social function in some sense was never considered sufficient reason to justify forms of life that seemed ultimately degrading and destructive of the humanity of all the participants involved. Such human activities might be recognized as “jobs” or legitimate pursuits in any given society, and might in perverse ways even point to the one who can save us from such degradations. But they can only be considered parodies of true Christian vocations into which God calls human beings so that they can serve the up-building of one another.

That there have been long-running debates about whether or not soldiers and policeman can claim to be pursuing a legitimate Christian vocation is relevant for our discussion here. The earliest Christians thought it was impossible for Christians to be soldiers, not least because Roman soldiers who swore allegiance to Mars, the god of war (Tertullian: XII). The immediate effect of this confession was to ensure that the first wave of Christian martyrs were Roman soldiers executed for sedition in refusing their military oath. With the conversion of Constantine this equation decisively changed, not least because the oath was removed or attenuated by attaching it to the emperor, now a Christian who pledged to serve the God of peace. At this point it must again suffice to say that the debate about whether or not a Christian can be a soldier has never been finally resolved among Christians; the early Christian sensibility that there is a fundamental contradiction between the routine deployment of violence and the Christian confession has been reinvigorated in recent decades (cf. Yoder 2009b; Hauerwas 2004). Though some youth programs in MMA have been linked to police training (Marino 2013), no serious argument has yet been offered to defend it as an outgrowth of a military vocation.

What we can at least say, given the foregoing, is that the claim that boxing and MMA are legitimate Christian vocations would have to receive far more robust theological justifications than they have so far received. Until that justification is offered, the infinitely elastic appeal to Christian engagement in these sports being a form of missional evangelism

(which at least expresses an awareness that it can only be justified by explicating it as an act of love for the neighbor) is insufficient to establish them as legitimate Christian vocations. Such an appeal no more validates boxing and MMA than a whole range of other illicit activities in the absence of a thicker account of how these activities should be understood as acts of love and service to our neighbors. Practitioners must explain why, as followers of the Prince of Peace, these activities should be considered among the many forms of life configured as a form of life, which aims to receive with gratitude the gifts of the Creator given to us and to others.

There is one final aspect of the tradition of just war thinking that continues to shape this arena of human activity as it has re-emerged in the modern period. The underlying aim of the whole just war tradition in all its permutations was not to justify, but to *limit* and even *eliminate* violence if and where possible (Bonhoeffer: 109-10). The language of just war is most often used today in a drastically reduced form, which assumes that just war names a set of rules that can tell political decision makers when it is justifiable to enter a war, as well as what it is permissible to do in the course of a war. The important point to note, however, is that the condition of the emergence of this tradition was an agreement at a deeper level among Christians over the centuries; Christians are always on the side of de-escalation, precisely because they recognize the God-given value of the neighbor's bodily integrity and because they are fundamentally peacemakers. It is on the basis of this fundamental moral and theological commitment, for instance, that modern laws about gun control have emerged in states, such as the UK, and alongside them detailed policies about police not carrying guns on their person (Schlabach). In this light the militarization of police forces currently underway in the United States (Appuzo) should not be seen as unrelated to the rising popularity of violent sports and the role they play as entertainment for the masses (Marino 2014: 55; Morin). Together, violent sports and their role can be read as indications of the decay of the presumption for de-escalation that characterized the Christian tradition of thinking about violence, a decay not unlike that displayed in the Crusades or other missionary activities pursued by violent methods.

One of the other places where we can see the impact of this waning moral sensibility in the developed west is in the endurance of rules in sport that limit certain forms of violence – biting, eye-gouging, stopping fights after a certain number of blows have struck the head, or when an opponent is in an arm or leg lock that will inevitably lead to the breaking of a limb or suffocation. Given the logic of the sport, why not allow such tactics? A common answer to that question by practitioners today might be that it is “not good for the image of the sport” to appear wantonly bloody or violent, though some might also worry about the permanent disablement of opponents. What we are suggesting is that these attempts to reign in certain types of violence are, in the modern world, the tail end of the moral agreement that just war thinking encapsulated, within which long running and morally serious attempts in Christendom to flesh out the meaning of Jesus' command to love one's neighbor were honed. On these grounds Christians involved in sports like boxing and MMA should, at the very least, be outspoken promoters of continual adjustments of rules and the practices of refereeing fights in order to continually ratchet down the harm inflicted on opponents – a moral and spiritual imperative that impinges equally on Christian practitioners, coaches, and spectators and is applicable to every sport which contains elements of violence.

If Christians are to argue (as we are inclined) that today it is illegitimate to call boxing and MMA fighting Christian vocations, this raises the question of why so many contemporary Christians experience it as a realm of freedom and liberation. Here the Christian theologian faces the pastoral imperative to ask: What does the rising popularity of MMA, at the expense of boxing, tell us about the state of our current societies? Here closer attention to specific cultural configurations is crucial. As one documentary filmmaker has well captured, in the American south cage fighters narrate their participation in the sport as part of a search for an authentic life, a life others will remember (*Fightville*). For them MMA offers young people an answer to the vacuousness and banality of life, especially young white men in an area with some significant economic and social deprivation. Other themes often struck are the quest for personal honor and dignity, which goes hand in hand with a desire for self-determination. Though consumer capitalist economies do not seem to offer much life satisfaction to young aggressive and ambitious males, it trains us to feel that things are more “real” if money is riding on it; when one’s livelihood is on the line, training and fighting have not only become one’s job, but this job has been recognized as significant by society.

Most of these themes are struck in the Hollywood feature film that did more to popularize MMA among North American Christians than anything else: *Fight Club*. The release of that film in 1999 arguably tapped into the precise crisis of American masculinity that middle-class evangelical pastors in the U.S. had been trying to meet, first with movements designed to shore up the tradition of marriage, such as the Promise Keepers, but quickly turning to more aggressive recoveries of masculine virtues (Eldredge), of which Christian MMA movements are arguably the most extreme (Morin; Borer and Schafer). Mark Driscoll and Ryan Dobson are some of the more prominent Christian advocates of MMA to emerge after *Fight Club*, but they are by no means alone, as documented in the recent documentary *Fight Church*. In a society in which males in the formerly dominant social class have lost economic opportunity due to the processes of economic rationalization and globalization, experience themselves as losing authority in the home, as the dominance of patriarchal presumptions crumble in the wake of the sexual revolution and the women’s right movement, and feel embattled as they try to protect the pulpits of their churches from the rising tide of female ministers, it is not surprising that a hyper-masculine martial domain has seemed a promising development. The gains in self-respect and discipline exhibited by the participants are not in any way denied when we nevertheless assert that it is not MMA, which has redeemed and repurposed rudderless lives (Marino 2003; Rutler). MMA has only managed to capture a legitimate protest against a vacuous and denuding society that offers so little to many of its members that such gory forms of entertainment can seem not only attractive but pleasurable (Morin).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The aim of this exploratory essay was to critically examine the seemingly paradoxical existence of the Christian boxer or mixed martial arts exponent. Of the three theses presented in the introduction, our reflections have led us to believe that:

Boxing and MMA are immoral and, are thus, not appropriate or helpful for humans (with Christian belief) to participate in, and/or watch; however,

within God's economy these activities may engender *some* moral goods (e.g., positive character development and healthy civil engagement = social harmony).

While we are sympathetic with the sentiments of fight-legend George Foreman, who suggests that boxing “. . . makes young people less violent,” as Christian theologians we are very uncomfortable with the *intentional* (sinful?) interpersonal violence directed at an opponent, who is fashioned in the image of God. Boxing and MMA may indeed develop some positive character attributes and perhaps allow some individuals to divert deeply felt pathologies of anger and violence away from the general public – the local gang member, a wife, a child – but Christian scholars and ministers (including those ministering in *Fight Church*) need to begin to explore the underlying reasons *why* they participate, and why other physical sports that do not involve intentional violence could not be used to the same effect. In 1962 the Catholic moral theologian, Richard McCormick, echoed similar thoughts:

. . . regardless of what answer we come up with, it is both a sign and guarantee of abiding spiritual health to face issues at their moral root. It is never easy to question the moral character of our own pleasure and entertainment (1).

Since the 1960s, the thirst for violent sports has arguably increased exponentially in our globalized and mediatized age, and it is therefore incumbent on theologians representing the Church to continue to think hard about such pastimes. A wide range of questions remain to be asked: the necessity of such athletes distancing themselves from their own bodies (Morin); the profile and culpability of contemporary spectators on such sports (Marino 2014; Borer and Schafer); and female participation in such sports (Fields), to name a few.

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