



THE PARALLEL OF MODERN-DAY SPORT TO RELIGION: AN ANALYSIS OF HOW SOCIETY HAS TRANSFORMED SPORT INTO A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT:

Sport has become a growing phenomenon in our society and is one of the most prominent customs of prevalent culture throughout the world. Religion, on the other hand, has always been very prevalent throughout the world and has been the foundation of the world. We as a society have shaped sports to be a form of religious devotion. The manifestations of traditional religion that are seen in the chapel are comparable to those seen in the stadium. The extreme fandom that we see as well as the rituals and formal procedures that are performed before, during and after sporting events resemble those performed for religious purposes. This paper takes an in-depth look into some of the research into the connection between sport and religion as it takes the definition of religion and then compares it with sport.

KEYWORDS: SPORT TO RELIGION, traditional religion, during and after sporting.

INTRODUCTION

In the mid-nineteenth century German philosopher Karl Marx in his Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right stated that "Religion is the opiate of the masses." Now 150 years later in the start of the 21st century can it be posited that "Sport is the opiate of the masses?" This analogy has been asserted by many sociologists as well as psychologists today. Opiates are physically addicting drugs but also used in the field of medicine to ease suffering and has even helped to save many lives. Opium is the most effective drug in relieving pain, especially severe and excruciating pain. Although sport is not physically addicting, it can be psychologically addicting. Sport has become like an obsession in our society, therefore to proclaim that sport is an opiate would not be implausible. Sport is capable of reducing the stress of everyday life for the fan by moving their attention from the pressures and struggles of daily life into the exhilaration and enjoyment of the game. Nevertheless, in recent years several scholars have compared sport to religion believing that sport has become a form of religious devotion. Worship, prayer, fellowship with others, ceremonies and rituals are all expressions of religion; however we see all of these same types of expressions performed toward sport throughout the world. It should come as no surprise that the spirit or excitement, the activities and rituals that you see in sport today parallels that of religion. This paper will evaluate and explore the parallel between religion and sport from a societal perspective and how many of the manifestations of traditional religion are now seen in sport. This paper is not solely about religion but it will explore the religious nature of sport. This paper will also explore the variety of definitions of the term religion as well as sport, the connections between sport and religion, and sport fandom. People do not often think about religion when talking about sport. These two systems have never been linked to one another as

much as they have in recent years. Normally, one would not connect sport which is fun, competitive, intense, and in some instances violent in nature, to that of religion, which in contrast is often viewed as somber, reverent, and sacred in nature. Not many would associate the attendance at church or a synagogue in traditional religion with one's attendance in the gymnasium or arena in sport. Many would not link the rituals performed in religion with rituals performed in sport, however "there are numerous examples of identity between religion and sport rituals in the public sphere." One can go on and on about the comparisons between both systems. This thinking is not just true of Americans but for our worldly society, just consider European and South American soccer or as they call it "futbol" as well as baseball in the Caribbean islands. Indeed if people decided to ponder these two subjects, they would often contemplate religion in sport. A prime example of that would be to consider religion in sport as it pertains to the actions of Tim Tebow, a former quarterback in the National Football League (NFL). Tebow, a proclaimed Christian, gained notoriety with his symbolic allegiance to his faith by the customary Christian act of kneeling on the field following any score made by his team to exhibit praise, thanks, and reverence to his given belief. Other proclaimed Christian athletes such as Tebow were not different in their actions to share their faith in the public eye, believing that their faith is the driving force behind their success. Furthermore, many athletes use their faith or religion to support their athletic endeavors. Ray Lewis, a former NFL linebacker, was another athlete to openly express his devotion of faith on the field as a testimony for using God-given talents. Lewis went so far as to run across the field after winning the Super Bowl in 2013 with a shirt that displayed the bible verse "Psalm 93." These are just a few examples of how many may interpret these two systems being interconnected. It is, however, a controversial topic that many feel should be kept to themselves, but this is certainly a topic for another time. Shirl Hoffman, author of *Sport and Religion*, compared sport to religion versus sport for entertainment. He stated that: Sport is not merely fun and games, not merely diversions, not merely an entertainment. A ballpark is not a temple, but it isn't a fun house either. A baseball game is not entertainment, and a ballplayer is considerably more than a paid performer. No one can explain the passion, commitment, discipline and dedication involved in sport by evasions like these. Sport is more like religion than like entertainment. Believers in sport do not go to sporting events to be entertained; to plays and dramas, maybe, but not to sport. Sport is far more serious than the dramatic arts, much closer to primal symbols, metaphors, and acts, much more ancient and more frightening. Sport is a mystery of youth and aging, perfect action and decay, fortune and misfortune, strategy and contingency. Sport is rituals concerning human survival on this planet: liturgical enactments of animal perfection and the struggles of the human spirit to prevail. If sport was entertainment, why should we care? It is far more than that. So when we see them abused, our natural response is the rise of vomit in the throat. If sport was mere entertainment we would not see fans burning their favorite player's jersey after leaving their favorite team, we would not see fans fighting and murdering one another just because they love different teams, we would not see the start of wars because of a soccer match, we would not see an entire city gain hope after a natural disaster because their team won the Super Bowl, and we certainly would not see thousands of people committing suicide because of their team. The outcome of games does affect fans. They care and if one looks at the difference between entertainment and involvement of spirit, it is without question apparent. This is why there are 24 hours of sport coverage all over the television every single day. Therefore, we as a human society have shaped sport to be a form of religious devotion. The religious elements that are seen in religion are also found within sport. "To have a religion, you need to have a way to exhilarate the human body, and desire, and will, and the sense of beauty, and a sense of oneness with the universe and other humans. You need chants and songs, the rhythm of bodies in unison, the indescribable feeling of many who together "will one thing" as if they were members of a single body. All these things you have in sport." Unfortunately, because this idea has only been discussed and debated as of recently, it is still difficult to express what it is that gives sport its spirit and power. As we move forward, we must unpack what religion really is and the characteristics of it as well as sport.

WHAT IS RELIGION? When discussing this topic, as well as attempting to define the role of religion, one must determine an appropriate definition of the term religion. In order to compare sport to religion, it relies on one's definition of the term. Religion is extremely difficult to define although scholars and theologians constantly attempt to define and describe it. In addition, the arguments, discussions and definitions for the term are

endless. As a result, scholars and theologians have yet to agree upon one universal definition of religion. However, religion cannot be defined except by the characteristics by which are found wherever religion itself is found. Nevertheless, the one aspect of religion that must be agreed upon, and is required to remotely be considered as religion, is that it is a belief system held by a group of people who publicly share that religion. Religion is more than the idea of gods or spirits, and consequently cannot be defined exclusively in relation to these. For example, the religion of Buddhism recognizes no god. It is a religion that depends not on a god or superior power but only oneself. "Instead of praying, in the ordinary sense of the term, instead of turning towards a superior being and imploring his assistance, he relies upon himself and meditates." 5 In Buddhism though, one must know the good doctrine or the four holy truths and put it into practice. That is how Buddhism is a religion, it admits the existence of sacred things such as those four noble truths and the practices derived from them. Emile Durkheim, in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* asserts that "there can be no religion except where there are prayers, sacrifices, propitiatory rites, etc. Thus we have a very simple criterium which permits us to distinguish that which is religious from that which is not." However, we see here with this great religion of Buddhism, where invocations, propitiations, sacrifices and prayers properly so-called are far from holding a preponderating place, and which consequently do not present that distinctive sign by which some claim to recognize those manifestations which are properly called religious. This makes for one inexact determination of what can be religion and what cannot. Nevertheless, divinity is not a characteristic that determines a religion. The following are a few characteristics that most religions will encompass: 1. Interaction with the supernatural.

BELIEFS In this chapter it is the nature of religion as a whole that we seek to express, therefore we look to proceed as if it were a sort of indivisible entity but, in reality, religion is made up of parts. Religion is a more or less complex system of legends, beliefs, rites and ceremonies. Now a whole cannot be defined except in relation to its parts. 21 Therefore we must define religion relative to its elements that are the basis of it. The first elementary notion we must manage is unquestionably the category of beliefs. "Beliefs are states of opinion which, whether simple or complex, presuppose a classification of all the things, real and ideal, of which men think." 22 Basically, beliefs are convictions that things held in the mind are true. They form the basis of behavior and are the foundations of our attitude. Understanding beliefs and how profound they are will aid to understand the prejudices, discrimination, aggressive behaviors and group decision-making that occur in society.

THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE

As Durkheim states in *Elementary forms of Religious Life*, these beliefs can be divided by two distinct terms: the sacred and the profane. "Religious beliefs are the representations which express the nature of sacred things and the relations which they sustain, either with each other or with profane things." Sacred, which is derived from the Latin word "sacer," denotes that which is Holy. The sacred constitutes phenomena which are set apart, revered, and distinguished from all other phenomena that constitute the profane or the mundane. For example, in Christianity it can be considered that the Cross, the Bible and Angels are sacred. In its Catholic form the Virgin, the Saints, holy water, and the rosary are recognized as sacred. In contrast, the profane is the absolute distinction of the sacred. "The sacred thing is par excellence that which the profane should not touch, and cannot touch with impunity." Consequently, the profane is anything within a society that is not sacred. "Each homogeneous group of sacred things, or even each sacred thing of some importance, constitutes a centre of organization about which gravitate a group of beliefs and rites, or a particular cult; there is no religion, howsoever unified it may be, which does not recognize a plurality of sacred things.

• RITES AND RITUALS

This is where we touch upon another elementary notion of rites. "There are beliefs that are clearly manifested only through the rites which express them; therefore these two parts of our analysis cannot fail to overlap." According to Durkheim, rites are simply the rules of conduct which prescribe how a man should comport himself in the presence of these sacred objects. This may include jumping, whirling, dancing, crying, singing, etc. It is the conceptions and beliefs which are considered as the essential elements of religion. As for the rites, from this point of view they appear to be only an external translation, contingent and material, of these

internal states which alone pass as having any intrinsic value. 28 Rites and rituals are similar in meaning, however a rite designates one single ritual act; ritual a series of rites. Robert Bocoock in *Ritual in Industrial Society* provides us with a basic definition of a ritual: the symbolic use of bodily movement and gesture in a social situation to express and articulate meaning. It can also be simply said that rituals are sets of actions that are repeatedly performed as a sign of worship and to commemorate events or beliefs. Some rituals may include attending Sunday church service, worshipping, praying five times a day for Muslims, celebrating Hanukkah for Judaism, etc. When a certain number of sacred things sustain relations of coordination or subordination with each other in such a way as to form a system having a certain unity, but which is not comprised within any other system of the same sort, the totality of these beliefs and their corresponding rites and rituals constitutes a religion. In *THE CHURCH* Wherever we observe the religious life, we find that it has a definite group as its foundation. This is where community comes into play. "A society whose members are united by the fact that they think in the same way in regard to the sacred world and translate these common ideas into common practices, is what is called a Church." 30 Religious beliefs that are held individually are not received merely by all members of the group, however they are something that belongs to the group and which makes for unity. Individuals who have similar beliefs are united through the simple fact that they have a common faith. One will never find a single religion without a Church. Rather directed by priests or ministers or an official directing body, there will never be a religion void of a Church. As Emile Durkheim argues, religion is both a product and producer of social cohesion.

FOLK RELIGION AND CIVIL RELIGION As we close this chapter we must touch briefly upon the ideas of folk religion and civil religion. Folk religion is a combination of shared moral principles and behavioral customs that emphasize the common religion of a people as it emerged out of the life of 'the folk' ...plus those religious ideas, values, symbols, ceremonies, and loyalties which the overwhelming majority of the people of any state or nation hold in common." 31 It arises from one's daily life experiences in order to provide social integration and the legitimation of values. The unusually practical character of the rituals and beliefs of the folk religion was noted by A.R. Eckardt in *The Surge of Piety in America*, it fosters individual security, it aids brotherhood, it contributes to social solidarity. In a word, religion is good because it is good for people....religion bears the stamp of social approval and the social interest bears the stamp of religious approval. "The power of this folk religion consists in the condition of positive relationships of the community and whose maintenance is the duty of the members of the society as a mystic life which binds all together."

SPORT FANDOM

As previously mentioned, the aspect that invites the comparison between sport and religion is the intense excitement and the spirit of community that they both generate. Sport mimics religion's rituals and induces fanaticism and sensation. Fandom is what this has been termed. Fandom characterizes the feeling of fascination with a subject or activity and the camaraderie with others who share the same interest. Catherine Bell, in *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, also defined it as "a way of action by a ritualized social body who possesses, to various degrees, a cultural sense of ritual." Sport fandom essentially is the major reason why this comparison has been made between the two systems. On a daily basis religious radicalism is seen throughout the world with the violence that occurs due to religious views. We see groups being punished for voicing opinions contrary to the Church's doctrine, people being martyred, and the hate produced because of different beliefs. The passion, commitment, dedication, and affection that fans of sport express is entirely similar to the way followers of traditional religion express theirs. Fans have rituals and formal procedures that are performed before, during and after sporting events that resemble those performed for religious purposes. Similar to traditional religion and its extremists, sport also possesses its radical followers. Fans put much of their time, focus, energy, effort, and money into sport, and today's society has been shaped to accommodate this. The 2005 Farrelly brothers-directed film "Fever Pitch" depicts the extreme nature of sport fandom. It portrays the life of a fanatic baseball fan whose main priority and only love in life is his favorite team, the Boston Red Sox. He is an obsessed fan that attends every home game and never misses a road game. A life encircled around the Red Sox and everything that involves them. The apartment he lives in has a reproduction of the Green Monster – the left field wall in Fenway Park – that covers half his living room. His closet is lined up with Red Sox jerseys and team warm-ups, in addition

to the countless bobble-head dolls and team memorabilia throughout the room. He sleeps in a Red Sox T-shirt each night, uses a Red Sox credit card and even has Yankees toilet paper. This is a perfect illustration of the fandom that has been formed from sport.

TAILGATING

Sport Fandom is seen in the ritualistic behavior that sport fans indulge themselves in before every sporting event. The behavior of fans painting their faces and body painting, in addition to the piling on of licensed apparel is all within the realm of sport fandom. Tailgating has become the most popular pre-game ritual in all of sport. Tailgating can be described as a delicate balance between fandom and celebration. It is a place where a combination of fans can come and enjoy pre-game together while grilling food, drinking beer and throwing ball together. Whether it is the companionship or the comradeship that is produced before an intense sporting event, this act of pre-celebration has almost become just as important as the sporting event itself. Furthermore, despite all the changes and the growth of tailgating through the decades, one thing has endured, the spirit of the fans.

CONCLUSION

Looking at both sport and religion from a societal perspective, one can see the relation and similarities between the two. One can understand the religious nature of sport and how the elements that are found within religion are also found within sport. Sport has become an obsession in this society as it can be seen with the numerous billion-dollar industries in sport including fantasy sport. It has forced society to cater to the demand of fans that put the majority of their time, energy and focus into sport. "The parallel between religion and sport might not be so far-fetched as one might think. As a result of mystical commitments, sport and religion open man towards the acceptance and actualization of being. A partial answer is now uncovered to our obvious difficulty in defining sport. Basically, sport, like religion defies definition. In a manner it goes beyond definitive terminology. Neither has substance which can be identified. In a sense both sport and religion are beyond essence." The comparisons are plenty when it comes to sport and religion. The spirit and rituals that are seen in sport today have become the same as seen in religious practices. Sport takes the form of religious devotion in many ways as it can be seen through the ceremonies and festivals like the Super Bowl, the rituals that fans perform such as face and body painting, or even the intense excitement and spirit of community generated. Even the jargon normally associated with religion is seen throughout sport. Words like faith, sacred, love, sacrifice, and dedication are now being associated with sport. Religion is a difficult term to define, however it can only be defined by its characteristics.

It is made up of beliefs that are held by group of people, which is the community or church. Religion involves that which is sacred and profound, rites, rituals, and ceremonies or festivals. Sport is also another term that is not exactly defined but described by its characteristics. Howard Slusher identified its characteristics as, Contention of Interest or competition, Consistency of Role, Utilization-Actualization, and Variable Predictability. The numerous connections that sport and religion have allow for society today to notice the close parallel between sport and religion. The spaces that these systems occupy are even comparable. One can compare the religious importance that both Madison Square Garden and the Sistine Chapel have on their followers as they both are iconic houses of worship. The expressions performed in the "sacred space" of both systems are no different to one another. One will experience the unity of clapping, singing, chants, and encouragement in both. The ritualistic behavior of the believers in both systems is a major reason why this comparison has been made. Rituals in traditional religion such as communion or the singing of a holy song have incredible significance just as the singing of the national anthem or the singing of "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" in baseball has. The festivals of Easter, Christmas, and Hanukkah bring together devout believers, no different than the way a championship game in sport brings together its followers. They both deal with shaping the individual and strengthening values. They develop character, reinforce commitment, perseverance, and suffering. There are legends and legendary figures among both systems that offer followers someone to emulate. There are comparisons to how followers in traditional religion are to imitate those like Moses, Muhammad, and Elijah in comparison to how followers of

sport are to imitate those like Tiger Woods, Michael Jordan, and Wayne Gretsky. Along the same lines, hero worship toward legendary figures occurs by fans and followers of traditional religion alike. There is also the transcendent quality that both sport and religion share which connects the followers of both to the “ultimate” or to a higher level. This gives them meaning to everyday life and can be manifested through the many sport fans who attempt to get their ashes dumped on playing-fields after death. The totem that Durkheim discusses distinguishes teams from one another but it also gives different meaning to different followers. Similar to how The Cross in Christianity may signify joy, hope, victory or triumph, a team’s logo may signify certain symbolizations for their followers. For example, the New Orleans Saints Fleur-de-lis logo now may signify hope, kinship, or benevolence.

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