

‘Jesus Saves’ and ‘Clothed in Christ’: Athletic Religious Apparel in the Christian CrossFit Community

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Abstract

The popular sport of CrossFit has attracted a number of Christians who simultaneously celebrate their passion for their faith and their passion for their sport. In this interplay of sport and religion, fashion becomes an important means for the profession of faith. This essay focuses specifically on religious athletic t-shirts that appear regularly among Christians in CrossFit. I argue that these are not a mere profession of faith but serve a dual purpose: on the one hand being athletic (and one could argue secular) and on the other being religious symbols with a deeper theological meaning. As such, they are sites where business opportunities, religious and sacramental practices, advertisement, and consumption practices collide. I argue that religious CrossFit t-shirts need to be taken seriously as religious-sacramental practice, but also that religious athletic clothing makes faith fit for consumption.

Introduction

CrossFit has grown rapidly from its inception in a gym opened in Santa Cruz, California by founder, Greg Glassman, in 2001, to having 10,000 affiliates across the world in 2014 (Beers 2015, 3). The sport continues to grow today and CrossFit has attracted a number of Christians who use it to simultaneously celebrate their faith as well as their passion for their sport. Some of these Christian CrossFitters use religious athletic apparel to publicly profess their faith in Christ. Examples of religious athletic t-shirts include those with 'Jesus Saves, Bro' inscriptions, t-shirts manufactured by apparel companies, such as *Humbled Daily*, which specifically target Christian CrossFitters and weightlifters, or t-shirts sold by the Christian CrossFit community *FaithRx'd*. In this essay I argue that these t-shirts are sites where business opportunities, religious and sacramental practices, advertisement, and consumption practices collide. I argue that religious CrossFit t-shirts need to be taken seriously as religious-sacramental practice, but that they also make religion and faith consumable.

Pace (2011) defines religion as a communication system and Barnard (2002, 9) argues that 'social relations between people are constructed, experienced and understood' through garments. Using religious CrossFit apparel as the example, the goal of this essay is to extend Barnard's argument to show that through garments, athletes construct, experience, make sense of, and link together the various religious and social spaces they inhabit. Through religious athletic apparel, the athlete, the gym, the competition floor, and the audience, become public arenas in which religion *as* communication is enacted and played out.

In some of the examples that will be drawn upon athletes describe clothing themselves in religious garments as a deliberate decision. This choice resonates with biblical verses such as Galatians 3:27 in which the Apostle Paul reminds his readers that

Christians have ‘put on’ Christ: ‘As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ’. Paul’s notion of putting on Christ and putting on a new self will provide the interpretative theological framework for this paper. The first section of the paper provides an overview of the relationship between CrossFit and clothing practices in sport. The second section discusses religious communities emerging within CrossFit. The third section looks at how these cultures become manifest in the material culture of fashion. In particular, I will look at how religious athletic t-shirts can be understood as a form of ‘putting on’ Christ and putting on a new self. In my examples, I will be looking at t-shirts worn by athletes affiliated with the *FaithRx’d* community, probably the most prominent and visible Christian CrossFit community, and the company *Humbled Daily*, founded by and catering specifically to Christian CrossFitters.

Methodological note

This essay is written from my position as an enthusiastic CrossFitter. Its incentive lies in my encounters of images of religious athletic apparel when following CrossFit athletes on social media or visual coverage of CrossFit events and competitions on Instagram and YouTube. Having been raised Catholic, these visual encounters of religious clothing immediately reminded me of the role garments play in the Catholic tradition, in particular during the celebration of baptism where the baptizand receives the baptismal garment.

My being in the field and the often casual encounters while visiting and working out at 20 CrossFit ‘boxes’ (gyms) across Europe and the USA to date, have informed my understanding of bodily and material practices in the sport (Bunsell 2013, 1-6). Being informed by my experience and encounters, some of the material presented here might have an anecdotal appearance, yet anecdotes and vignettes can be ‘powerful vehicles of

both communication and confirmation' (Engelke 2008, S12f). Anecdotes both capture where things are out of the ordinary and also help trace the 'co-emergence of research, researcher and researched' (Michael 2012, 27).

Garments are mediums of communication and serve as an 'interface or seam between body and society' (Pezzoli-Olgiati and Höpflinger 2013, 8). As interfaces, they do not inhabit a single space but follow the individual into the various spaces they inhabit and engage with. To understand how this interface functions and the meaning individuals attach to it, it is important to 'follow the thing' (Marcus 1995, 106; Kopytoff 1986), in this case the religious t-shirt. Following the thing further allows the researcher to uncover the value the (economic) exchange might create and people attach to it (Appadurai 1986, 3–5). As such, this paper does not focus exclusively on what is printed on the t-shirts. Rather, the focus is on how t-shirts are used in practice: how they are represented on vendor's websites, how athletes make sense of wearing them, and how they are represented on social media platforms such as Instagram (Elgesem 2015).

CrossFit and the Material Culture of Fashion in Sports

CrossFit is a recent, very popular, high intensity fitness activity emphasizing functional fitness and combining elements from Olympic lifting, gymnastics, athletics, and body weight movements. Workouts are usually performed in small groups under the supervision of a CrossFit coach at dedicated CrossFit boxes. There is a strong emphasis on community which is fostered by the marketing material produced by CrossFit HQ (Headquarters, the trademark holder), CrossFit coaches, and individuals in their account of what they appreciate about the sport (Dawson 2017, 375). The community does not merely exist in narratives but is enacted through lived practice, for example, BBQs, nights

out, or travelling together to CrossFit events fostering a sense of connectedness. When people travel, they also often drop in at local boxes. The boxes I have visited during my travels have extended their hospitality and with the shared interests of fellow CrossFitters, they have provided a bit of a home whilst being away. In short, the individual's experience of CrossFit relies to a large extent on all the small and independently run CrossFit boxes. Yet, as Maguire (2008, 5) argues, fitness 'in contemporary culture [...] [is] primarily a commercial enterprise', not least because even the small boxes need to pay the bill. As such, the community experience is not simply something that 'spontaneously arises when people do these workouts together' (CrossFit HQ 2016a), but needs to be seen as a crucial part of the economic transaction or the product of CrossFit.

CrossFit also contains elements of what Wheaton (2013, 6, 26) calls lifestyle sports or a '*style of life*' that includes signs, symbols, and promises of choice, freedom, and self-realization. As a style of life harnessing the power of symbols, it seems that CrossFit lends itself to a religious apparel market that both has access to a rich pool of symbols and understands faith as a brand. One of the owners of the Christian CrossFit apparel company *Humbled Daily* makes this brand approach to faith explicit, stating: 'Humbled Daily is technically a faith and fitness apparel brand' (Bailey 2015).

With its emphasis on measuring and comparability and performing workouts against the clock (CrossFit HQ 2016a), CrossFit also contains elements of what Pronger (2002, 4) calls 'technology of physical fitness'. By that he means not just a techno-culture in the practice of fitness (e.g. the latest gadgets and fitness trackers), but a techno-mechanic (or biomechanical) understanding of the body itself.

For some, CrossFit can become a transformative experience that transcends the ordinary. CrossFit HQ, for example, propagates videos of individuals testifying to how CrossFit dramatically changed their lives (CrossFit HQ 2015, 2016b). Some of these

stories employ a rhetoric that almost mimics religious conversion stories. While there is certainly a marketing spin on these videos, some of these stories reflect some of the experiences people who start CrossFit actually make.

Religious elements are also present in CrossFit in the form of apocalyptic, i.e. end-of-the-world, elements (Smith 2014; CrossFit HQ 2016c). CrossFit HQ's very definition of CrossFit contains such an apocalyptic touch: CrossFit's 'functional movements [...] are the core movements of life.... The program prepares trainees for any physical contingency – not only for the unknown but for the unknowable, too' (CrossFit HQ 2016a). The claim here is clear: CrossFit prepares people for life and the 'unknown' and 'unknowable' adds an apocalyptic touch to this preparedness. CrossFit can also be described with what Pronger (1998, 281) calls 'post-sport' combining and blurring culture, nature, and the primordial. The mythology of CrossFit includes a sense of rawness, authenticity, and honesty. Many boxes are located in industrial buildings; minimalist spaces which usually only include a rig, barbells and weights as well as a few rowing machines and bikes. All these elements radiate a sense of purity and mediate some sort of primal connection. They suggest that CrossFit boxes are not part of consumer culture, but instead are authentic, raw, primal, pure places where the athlete engages in honest and authentic bodywork. This perceived connection to something authentic is also linked to what Dawson (2017, 367) calls 'in search of the "improved" self'; and I understand 'improved' here as a self that wants to return to how nature intended us to live.

Taken together, I argue that the experience of community and transformation, the openness for symbolic practice, the primal connection, the apocalyptic elements, and the notion of self-improvement, invite religious practice. When Christian athletes ask 'Why

can't church be more like CrossFit?' (Hodges 2013, back cover), they testify to the CrossFit experience transcending the everyday and the ordinary.

CrossFit has also given rise to a distinct material culture of fashion. CrossFit fashion identifies the individual as CrossFitter, links them to the global community, and helps to transcend the local and the ordinary (Ornella 2015). Creating and expressing meaning or transcending the everyday through athletic garments is, of course, not unique to CrossFit, but common practice in the field of sport. In fact, material culture is an important element of sport as meaningful experience which acts to create the sport product (Mullin, Hardy, and Sutton 2007, 150; Hardy, Loy, and Booth 2009, 146). T-shirts form part of the symbolic repertoire of sports fandom (Dionísio, Leal, and Moutinho 2008, 21) and provide a form of collective identity that goes beyond the realm of sports and bleeds into the everyday (Gibson, Willming, and Holdnak 2002, 416–21). Buying material sports products, such as apparel, is distinct from other fields of consumption because sport stands outside of the everyday and ordinary: 'humans view sport as a "special" experience or as having a special place in their lives, and that marketers must approach sport differently than they do used cars, donuts, or tax advice' (Mullin, Hardy, and Sutton 2007, 17).

Christian Communities within CrossFit

The mix of the passion sport can elicit, sport's intangible and material nature, and the CrossFit mythology, the apocalyptic undertone and the emphasis on community and being part of something bigger invite religious practice. The group *Faith Rx'd* (2017c), for example, organizes worship and retreat weekends 'uniting fitness and faith'. Some of these retreat and prayer events take place at the box blurring the boundaries between what

is a gym, a social space, and a church.

Debating why he has introduced more people to CrossFit than to Jesus, Wade Hodges (Hodges 2013, 6) states,

Maybe it's because CrossFit has become a kind of church for us. The CrossFit community provides the connection encouragement, and accountability we need to make and maintain huge life changes. We are accepted as we are and simultaneously challenged to get better every day. We celebrate each other's victories every step of the way.

For Christian CrossFitters, such as Hodges, who are passionate about both their faith and their sport, religious athletic apparel provides unique opportunities for producing, branding, marketing, and consuming faith and faithful bodies. Religiously branded apparel transforms the (clothed) athletic body into a religiously branded body. These branded bodies become powerful communicators. Logos and brands are able 'to plug into the almost primal components of affective, bodily perception' (Paterson 2006, 210). A (religiously) branded body, then unfolds this power not only outwardly, for an audience, but also inwardly fostering an intimate sense of connection between the self and the brand (religion).

The logos and brands of religious CrossFit t-shirts can carry a diversity of messages. Some *Humbled Daily* t-shirts, for example, feature their logo, a barbell crossed with a nail, and the words 'Humbled Daily – Faith – Fitness – Est 2015'. Others carry a devotional-motivational message such as 'My Best for His Sake' (Humbled Daily 2017a). On their Instagram account, they regularly feature athletes and competitors wearing their

t-shirts (@humbled_daily 2017). The community *FaithRx'd* offers t-shirts with the *FaithRx'd* logo, a crown of thorns and the text 'FaithRx'd' (Faith Rx'd 2017b), or the message 'FEAR-LESS' in big bold letters (Faith Rx'd 2017a). Other religious apparel includes t-shirts with inscriptions such as 'Godfidence', 'Jesus Saves, Bro', or 'Fit For Him'.

Religious athletic garments give rise to religious discourses and we can follow these garments from their representation in web shops or stalls at competitions, to clothed bodies, and the discourses around these clothed bodies in social media. For example, members of the Christian CrossFit community *Faith Rx'd* are 'representing' at competitions (@faithrx_atl 2015, 2014); trainees at local boxes work out in 'Jesus Saves, Bro' t-shirts (@tyson_derkson 2017; @ingausakter 2015); and CrossFit 'Games competitor @jheppner66 doing work in a #faithrx shirt' (@faithrx 2015). In a blog post, a CrossFit Games Team competitor writes about her experience of competing in a 'Jesus Saves, Bro' t-shirt:

That afternoon during the Clean Complex, I picked my outfit out beforehand knowing I'd need a reminder...wearing a "JESUS SAVES, BRO" tank. That day I got to represent [sic] for the only brand worth representing. I wanted to glorify God and reflect my heart on the outside, so people could see where my strength comes from. After getting a hang power clean PR at 190lbs, and then being able to do it three more times right after, it fuelled me and the crowd full of energy. As the clock ran out and I almost made it to the heaviest barbell, the crowd was electric as they could see my struggle at such a heavy weight, and I jumped around pulling my shirt up so they could read it as people stood up and clapped louder. It was electric. (Ager 2015)

The word choice, ‘representing’ and ‘brand’, lends itself to the interpretation from both a religious studies perspective and a branding/marketing/consumption perspective. The grammatical ambiguity leaves open the question whether ‘brand’ refers to salvation, the saving Jesus, or a company/brand that produces such t-shirts. ‘Encouraging consumers to buy products that work as advertisements for the brand itself, effectively turning ourselves into “walking billboards”, is only the start’ (Paterson 2006, 216). If the faithful perceive of their faith as a brand, drawing on Paterson, quite provocatively one could argue that religious athletic garments turn the athlete into ‘walking billboards for Jesus’.

The public profession of faith is not unique to CrossFit but often follows an Evangelical template for the profession of faith that can be found in other sports, too (Krattenmaker 2010, 36f.). Religious athletic fashion, too, can be found in other sports. Active Faith (2017), for example, provides religious athletic garments for golf, running, or playing ball, with the aim to ‘inspire people to not only be active physically, but active in their faith’. Yet, athletes often perceive their sport to be distinct warranting a closer look at the (religious) clothing practices that have emerged within a particular sport:

As the sport of CrossFit continues to grow, I find it extremely amusing how easy it is becoming to pick out fellow Crossfitters [by the clothes they are wearing]. [...] Every sport has its own distinctives. Those distinctives make it easy to identify the person with the sport they compete in. (CoachArnold 2015)

Fashion bearing religious inscriptions marks the religious believer and communicates religious identity and religious norms (Neal 2017, 225, 228). It can be a means for expressing, portraying, enforcing, and recognizing a 'good Christian' (Neal 2017, 224). It allows the believer to shape their outer appearance 'to correspond with the reborn inner person' (Hirdes, Woods, and Badzinski 2009, 154). As the term 'fashion' suggests, religiously inspired clothing is not confined to be used solely in religious spaces but infuses everyday life. In this fashion mix, t-shirts have become a particularly important and powerful Evangelical fashion trend (Neal 2017, 240).

Christian fashion is, of course, not just a means to express one's identity but has become big business. To date, Christians present a big market opportunity and religious products are a multibillion dollar business. Religion has become about selling religion, or in other words, converting by selling an idea of religion (Hutchins and Stielstra 2009; Twitchell 2007, 3, 62, 133). 'Before we are spiritualists', Twitchell (2007, 61f.) argues, 'we are materialists'. Einstein (2008, 4) argues that 'while religious practice is very much privatized, religious presentation and promotion has become widely acceptable within our culture'. Critically, we have to ask, however, why certain religious clothing practices, such as in CrossFit, seem to be cheered at, while others, both within and outside a sports context, receive heavy criticism (Rankin and Oltermann 2017; Spector 2017; Weiner 2017) or are interpreted as blurring of what should be fixed and stable boundaries (Conlon 2017). In particular, we need to ask how do economic interests and financial revenue play into processes of permissibility and cultural acceptance of religious clothing?

'Clothed in Christ': A Theological Approach

The material culture of religious CrossFit apparel and clothing oneself in religious

messages are performative practices (Bell 1998, 208). As such, religious athletic apparel can help the individual to navigate and orient themselves across the spaces and contexts they inhabit. However, they do not create culture *ex nihilo* but draw from religious resources such as Biblical texts and imaginaries, symbols, and narratives.

The Bible and the imagination it fostered are filled with images about clothing. For example, in ancient imagination, Adam and Eve's prelapsarian clothing was righteousness and glory (Kim 2004, 102). After the fall, Adam and Eve clothed themselves with fig leaves (Genesis 3:7); God provided them with 'garments of skins' (Genesis 3:21) when he expelled them from paradise. According to Psalm 93:1, God is 'robed in majesty' and 'girded with strength'. The Pauline corpus in the New Testament uses the language of clothing to call upon believers to clothe themselves with Christ (Romans 13:14), put on the new self (Ephesians 4:24), or wear their spiritual armour (1 Thessalonians 5:8). The Apocalypse uses clothing to draw boundaries between those who are saved, righteous, and lead a moral life, and those who are not. Clothing also serves as communicator to convey social, moral and theological values (Neufeld 2005, 69f., 75). All these examples have different theological aims, but one can assume that their use is rooted in the audience's everyday experience of garments: the intimate relationship one has with their garments and the way they can change the appearance and perception of the person wearing them (Kim 2004, 115).

Wearing religiously inspired athletic garments can thus be seen as a threefold process: first, as a practice that is rooted in everyday experiences of garments; second, as a practice that is inspired by religious imaginaries; and third, both give rise to a material culture that is both secular and religious at the same time. Religious athletic garments in CrossFit serve a dual purpose: on the one hand being athletic (and one could argue secular) and on the other being religious symbols with a deeper theological meaning.

It is important to point out that garments in the Bible do not just serve as metaphors but give rise to and inspire religious practice. For example, Galatians 3:27, ‘As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ’, has found expression in baptism rites. In the Early Church, the baptizand put on their baptismal robe after baptism (Kim 2004, 96–101). Today, putting on the baptismal robe is part of the baptismal liturgy in a number of Christian denominations. Paul’s reminder that believers are clothed in Christ and his exhortation to put on the new self, therefore, offer themselves as an interpretative framework for religious clothing practices in sports.

In the following, I will therefore focus on two ideas: a) that athletes clothe themselves in Christ when they wear t-shirts such as ‘Jesus Saves, Bro’, and b) that athletes are reminded to put on the new self by t-shirts that carry moral messages.

‘Put on Christ’ because ‘Jesus Saves, Bro’

‘Jesus Saves, Bro’ is one of the t-shirts some Christian CrossFitters wear both at competitions as well as while working out at their local boxes (@tyson_derkson 2017). Evangelical theology focuses on a personal relationship with Jesus and the idea that ‘Jesus saves’. These key theological ideas have also found their way into the Evangelical fashion industry. ‘Evangelicals have attempted to make Jesus fashionable and popular through displaying their faith on t-shirts’ (Neal 2017, 240). It should therefore come as no surprises that ‘Jesus Saves, Bro’ t-shirts also have made their way into the Evangelical Christian CrossFit culture.

Burger (2013) argues that the communication system ‘clothing’ can become entangled with one’s quest for salvation. Clothing can be that ‘behind which salvation hides, because as immaterial state it cannot become visible’ (Burger 2013, 200) – and one

might add: it cannot become visible other than in material expressions and manifestations. And even though fashion makes salvation visible, little research exists on religiously inspired t-shirts (Neal 2014, 184).

As visible and material expressions of salvation, religious athletic t-shirts can be understood as sacramentals. Catholic theology and liturgy distinguishes between sacraments and sacramentals. A sacrament is commonly understood as a visible expression (or sign, according to Augustine) of an invisible reality or grace (Vorgrimler 1992, 45). Sacramentals, on the other hand, resemble sacraments and dispose the believer 'to receive the chief effect of the sacraments, and various occasions in life are rendered holy' (Pope Paul VI 1963, §60).

The wearing of religious athletic garments, then, becomes a symbol through which athletes bear witness to and give body to an invisible reality. Höpflinger (2014, 177) argues that clothing is a 'communication system that embraces the whole of human communication'. Clothing oneself with religious garments is, to use Vorgrimler's (1992, 45) language, 'symbolic action in which human beings are engaged as believers'. Putting on and wearing a t-shirt with the message 'Jesus Saves, Bro' or 'Godfidence', or the *FaithRx'd* 'FEAR-LESS' t-shirt, therefore, needs to be seen as symbolic and material practice that engages the believer and the whole of their existence as athletes and as faithful. They are sacramentals because they can render sporting practices holy in the sense that they imbue them with religious meaning (Ornella forthcoming).

The language of clothing used in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament offers helpful cues to better understand contemporary religious athletic garments. After the fall, Adam and Eve clothed themselves in fig leaves (Genesis 3:7). In Genesis 3:21, God clothed Adam and Eve with 'garments of skin'. Kim argues that this might mean that God has started to restore Adam and Eve's original life in the image of God (Kim 2004, 14).

Athletic garments made by humans can be compared to the fig leaves in Genesis. Similar to the ‘garments of skin’, however, inscriptions such as ‘Jesus Saves, Bro’ hint at something else in the eye of the believer, the theological tension between the ‘already but not yet’: at salvation that is already here but not yet completed.

The aforementioned Galatians 3:27 establishes a link to baptism and aims to express a fundamental change in status of the believer. Kim (2004, 94f.) compares this status change with the Roman *toga virilis* which marked the coming of age of Roman boys and made a strong statement that he is a free Roman citizen. Through baptism, a similar change in status occurs as believers become heirs of God (Connell 2011, 133–35). While in his letter to the Galatians Paul wants to remind his audience what happened during baptism, in Romans 13:14 Paul aims to remind believers to continually actualize what happened in baptism, to realize and act out this inner change: ‘Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires’. In other words, putting on Christ is not just an inner change but must result in action and Christian conduct (Kim 2004, 138–40). When athletes wear a religious t-shirt, it often seems a deliberate choice (Ager 2015; @ingausakter 2015). By being deliberate, they embody and actualize Paul’s reminder both for themselves and their audience. Or drawing on Burger (2013, 200): they make visible an immaterial state and experience.

Linking the idea of ‘putting on Christ’ with clothing practices in CrossFit allows for a critical reflection on Christian theology. Chris Knight (1999) criticizes that Christianity shares in the linking of nudity and sex of contemporary society. He argues that Christianity should return to a celebration of nudity that goes beyond understanding nudity as mere means for sexual arousal. The ripped and muscled male and female bodies certainly have erotic appeal and some Christians observe vanity and a hedonistic lifestyle within the CrossFit culture (Arnold 2013). Yet, male and female CrossFit bodies do not

necessarily fit into popular beauty ideals (Shane 2016, 57). As such, I do not necessarily share Knights comments on nudity and sexual arousal because, as Stefanie Knauss (2009, 2014) argues, sexuality and sexual intercourse can lead to religious experiences and an encounter with the transcendent. I am wondering if these scarcely clothed athletes wearing religious attire could lead to a renewed appreciation of the body and all of its senses (including sexuality). The discipline many CrossFitters have fits well with the disciplined approach to the body in Protestantism. But when these athletes clothe themselves in Christ, meet to worship God through their workouts or perform Good Friday Workouts (Ornella forthcoming), it is a way of ‘carnal knowing’ and ‘sensual engagement with God’ (Isherwood and Stuart 1998, 12), a return to a more bodily Christian theology (Isherwood and Stuart 1998, 11).

Judges 6:34 adds an interesting twist to the idea of clothing oneself with Christ. Most commonly, the passage is translated as the Spirit of the Lord coming upon Gideon (NKJV and NIV), the NRSV translates that the Spirit ‘took possession’ of Gideon. In the Hebrew text, the word for ‘to clothe’, ‘to put on a garment’ is used. But it is not the Spirit that clothes Gideon. Rather, the Spirit *clothes itself* with Gideon (Brown, Driver, and Briggs 1907, 528) in order to empower Gideon (Kim 2004, 25). The idea of empowerment directly links to contemporary athletic practice, though in a repurposed and more functional way. The use of prayer in sports can have an impact on the athlete’s performance (Watson and Czech 2005, 27). Locker room prayer can function as a sort of pep talk for athletes (Hoffman 2011, 38). Religious athletic apparel can serve a similar motivational purpose, act as a sort of prayer-booster and help to keep the athlete going and endure the pain of the workouts. Using religious apparel, then, could be seen as a sort of invocation, as an expression of hope that the Spirit will clothe itself with the athlete in order to empower them to complete the sporting task and glorify God. In his

autobiography, the CrossFitter Rich Froning (2013), testifies to the motivational nature of religious verses on workout gear. During the 2011 CrossFit Games, he was wearing trainers with the inscriptions 'Galatians 2:20' and 'Matthew 27:27-56':

Seeing the verses on my shoes kept what I was doing in perspective. *Suck it up*, I'd tell myself *Keep going*. Christ had done that, and for the greatest cause that ever motivated any man in the history of our world. *Keep going* was the best way I knew to glorify God during my pain in the heat of competition (Froning 2013, 153).

Bringing athletic clothing practices, athletes' testimonials, Paul's letters, and Judges in conversation, raises critical questions about the purpose and role of material religion in sport. On the surface, religious t-shirts reference the transcendent. What if, however, the explicitness of these religious references pulls the reference to the other-worldly back into this world? I do not mean God's immanence here, rather, I am wondering if these t-shirts are explicitly religious so they can be part of both the mental game and the emotional hype in sports. This flipped referral also becomes visible in an American athlete's account of the audience's reaction to her wearing a religious t-shirt:

As the clock ran out and I almost made it to the heaviest barbell, the crowd was electric as they could see my struggle at such a heavy weight, and I jumped around pulling my shirt up [with the inscription "Jesus Saves, Bro"] so they could read it as people stood up and clapped louder. It was electric, and I'll never forget that feeling of pride and celebration! (Ager 2015).

In this example, the struggle of lifting ‘such a heavy weight’ is not the only reason for the audience to cheer on the athlete. Rather, being clothed in Christ (or ‘Jesus Saves, Bro’) seems to be a crucial ingredient of the hype. Of course, we need to read such narratives through the lens of the US landscape with a third of Americans thinking that being Christian is part of what it means to be American (Pew Research Center 2017). What a material Christian CrossFit culture in Europe might look like is yet to be seen as the European Christian CrossFit communities grow.

Putting on a new self

Clothing metaphors in Scripture often also come with ethical guidelines and moral exhortations. In the following verses from Colossians and Ephesians for example, the Apostle Paul describes the moral characteristics of Christians, what they should be (e.g. be kind and humble) and what they should stay away from (e.g. lying, impurity and corruption):

As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. (Colossians 3:12)

Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. (Colossians 3:9-10)

You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. (Ephesians 4:22-24)

To express the reality and the kind of character Christians should embody, Paul tells his audience that they have put off their old and corrupted self and clothed themselves with the new self. This new self is created in the image of God and ‘refers to the Christian’s new nature which is formed after the pattern of Christ’ (Kim 2004, 164). For Paul, the call (or reminder) to put on the new self is more than a call for proper ethical conduct. Rather, what he means is a fundamental change that happens in and with the person. The old self refers to humanity’s fallen and corrupted nature while the new self stands for ‘humanity’s renewed nature in Christ’ (Kim 2004, 182). The clothing metaphor Paul draws on expresses the urgency and radicality of the change in the believer: just as clothes can be swapped in an instant, cast out, and replaced with something else, new, and other, so too the believer must leave their old Adamic and fallen self behind (Kim 2004, 184; Connell 2011, 135).

Religious athletic clothing practices in CrossFit resonate the idea of putting on a new self. The idea of humility is one of the core messages of the *Humbled Daily* clothing line. The t-shirt ‘The Banner’ (Humbled Daily 2017b), for example, links and compares CrossFit (and weightlifting) experience with religious experience: ‘*Humbled by the CROSS, Humbled by the BARBELL, Humbled DAILY*’.

On a visual level, too, the cross and the barbell come together. Many of *Humbled Daily*’s t-shirts carry its logo in different sizes, a barbell crossed with a nail hinting at Jesus’ crucifixion. While we could focus on the fetishization of pain the nail seems to

express (Sticca 1970, 3–13; Sturges 2015, 33; Ornella forthcoming), I want to follow a different route of interpretation here. The logo suggests that both the barbell and the cross humble the person who approaches them. Even more so, by crossing both, the visual language suggests that what the barbell teaches and what Jesus teach can be compared – or at least supplement each other. Several passages in the New Testament refer to Jesus as teacher, (e.g. John 1:38 or John 20:16). By ‘putting on the new self’, or the religious t-shirt in this case, athletes become students of the barbell *and* of Jesus. They also share in Jesus’ role as teacher in educating their audience about humility, as an interview with *Humbled Daily* suggests:

In our video we say we are out to redefine humility. A lot of people see humility as a weakness and we’re out to change that and help realize they can grow from being humbled. [...] The biggest goal is to further the Lord’s kingdom. Fitness is an easy way to relate with people and to get on a deeper level with them. (Bailey 2015)

The Biblical idea of putting on a new self serves as a link between CrossFit and Christianity and contributes to the perception of some Christian CrossFitters that CrossFit and Christianity – quite naturally – go hand in hand.

CrossFit code of conduct changes little from box to box. Hard work, dedication and consistency are as common as bumpers, rings and ropes. CrossFit Faith, however, adds a little something to the mix. CrossFit Faith adds a spiritual side to their community. (Bunch 2012)

The new self that lives in the service of others seems to be yet another link that connects CrossFit and faith:

As soon as we started CrossFitting we realized just how much CrossFit was in the business of service, serving others specifically, while lifting others up... From the start, we have emphasized service first, and training second. (Bunch 2012)

And just as Paul reminds his communities that Christians need to continually actualize what happened in baptism, CrossFit, too, poses challenges in which Christians recognize themselves as Christians:

Just like in CrossFit, faith isn't always fun or easy, but its [sic.] always worth it. Whenever I am feeling lost in a WOD [Workout of the Day], I go back to the basics, whenever I feel lost in the world, I do the same thing. (Bunch 2012)

How is this new self acted out by manufacturing companies? Origin stories are important to imbue Evangelical t-shirts with authenticity (Neal 2017, 227). *Humbled Daily* provides its customers with such an origin story. While this story includes the aim to help athletes build Christ-centred lifestyles, it remains vague about what such a Christ centred lifestyle might look like or if it extends to the production processes of the apparel. In other words, is their statement of faith, 'WE BELIEVE SOULS CAN BE WON WHERE WE DO LIFE', only about saving souls for the world to come or does it include and extend to the

living and working conditions of those manufacturing the t-shirts? Should an exhortation to ‘humbly serve others’ and a reminder that Jesus ‘poured out His life for us’ not also include a statement that the t-shirts and their material have been ethically and responsibly sourced? Ultimately, it seems that theology is downplayed and the details are left to be interpreted by the individual (McDannell 1995, 261). But leaving the interpretation up to the individual makes faith fit for consumption and allows people to more easily buy into the product ‘faith’, even cheer to it and to the athlete wearing it.

I want to end on a very positive note, however. While putting on the new self is entangled in faith practices, entertainment, and economic interests, we can certainly find Christian CrossFitters who act out a new self that is inspired by humbleness and service of others (Leonard 2015).

Conclusion

Christian CrossFitters are not only very outspoken about their faith but create narratives about the overlap between their passion for CrossFit and their passion for their faith. This overlap between CrossFit and faith is rooted in the strong community both create as well as the values they propagate. Some athletes perceive the connection between CrossFit and Christianity to be a natural one which has given rise to a rich visual and material language and culture. To a number of Christian athletes, CrossFit, with its community and emphasis on work ethics, feels like church. In fact, some ask: ‘Do you ever think about what it would be like if church were more like CrossFit?’ (Hodges 2013, 5), and: ‘We love CrossFit and we love Jesus. Let’s introduce them to each other and see what happens’ (Hodges 2013, 7). Athletic clothing with religious inscriptions emerge when their passion for Jesus and their passion for CrossFit come together.

The religiously inscribed t-shirts do not have an inherent or absolute religious value merely because of their religious inscriptions. Rather, the demand for such t-shirts (Appadurai 1986, 4), and athletes introducing them into secular contexts bestows them with religious and economic value. *FaithRx'd* posted an image of the CrossFit athlete Jacob Heppner competing in a *FaithRx'd* t-shirt on their Instagram account (@faithrx 2015). Some of the comments included 'Where can I get these shirts?' and 'I'm from Germany – is it possible to order one in the Shop?' Similarly, when *Humbled Daily* aims to 'create products' for a life of faith, they create and cater to a form of sacred economy. Religious athletic clothing, then, becomes a contemporary form of religious devotional that makes religion tangible and consumable.

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