

Sport and Christianity: Historical Perspectives – An Introduction

Hugh McLeod,^a Nils Martinius Justvik^b and Rob Hess^c

^aDepartment of History, University of Birmingham, UK; ^bDepartment of Religion, Philosophy and History, University of Agder, Norway; ^cCollege of Sport and Exercise Science, Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia

Abstract

This paper provides an overview of a collection of works related to sport and Christianity from historical perspectives. After a brief general historiographical introduction, the material connected to the burgeoning field of sport and religion is summarized. In particular, it is noted that the works concentrate on diverse geographic locations and different time periods. The investigations are not limited to a narrow definition of Christianity, but encompass a wide range of denominations, related philosophies and viewpoints. In terms of variety, it is noted that different methodological and theoretical approaches are adopted, and, given the existing state of play, it is clear that there is still much to be uncovered, documented, and written about when it comes to the enduring topic of sport and Christianity. The conclusion is that any research agenda which emerges from observations on historical perspectives concerning the relationship of sport with aspects of Christianity will continue to resonate and add value to wider understandings of sport, culture and the human condition.

Keywords: Christianity; churches; religion; spirituality; sport history

... [W]hile there is a significant amount of scholarship on sports and Christianity, there is a distinct lack of primary empirical research in the area.

Nick J. Watson and Andrew Parker¹

This collection of papers had its genesis at the ‘Inaugural Global Congress on Sports and Christianity’, which was hosted by the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences at York St John University, England, 24-28 August 2016. Convened by Nick Watson, the ambitious aims of the Congress, as set out in the program, were to:

- Encourage global collaboration between academics, practitioners, politicians, clergy, administrators and athletes
- Produce quality academic and practitioner publications that have societal impact
- Through intentional mentoring and collaboration, develop individuals in their sphere of influence
- Affect a ‘culture shift’ in modern sport through the sharing of ideas and practices and a ‘coming together’ of individuals from across the academic disciplines and all streams and denominations of Christianity, culminating in an inclusive and ecumenical event.²

The Congress was comprised of 12 ‘thematic strands’, one of which was ‘Historical Perspectives on Sports and Christianity’.³ A relatively small number of papers were presented on the day that this strand was scheduled, and the strand leaders (the authors of this paper, and editors of the volume) agreed to elicit additional items by means of a further call for papers on the website of *The International Journal of the History of Sport*. While no specific theme was nominated, the editors encouraged the submission of papers on topics associated with sport, history and Christianity from a range of temporal, geographic, methodological and thematic perspectives. As it transpired, the process of peer-review and the final selection of submitted papers has produced a more than suitable palimpsest of material, reflecting a strong diversity of viewpoints, in part helping to address the dearth of ‘primary empirical research’ identified and bemoaned by Watson and Parker in their systematic, and exhaustive, review of relevant literature published in 2014.⁴

This is not to suggest that the field is barren. In fact, the general intersections between sport and religion have attracted unprecedented academic interest in the last two decades, and readers are directed to the recent works of Watson and Parker for an impressive mapping of the published material as it relates to sport and Christianity.⁵ Special issues of sport history journals devoted to sport and religion are also not new, as evidenced, for example, by a hefty multilingual 2009 volume of *Stadion* devoted to ‘... a stimulating historiographical debate on the relation between sport and religion’.⁶ Indeed, conferences dedicated to investigations of related themes, in some cases tied to the launch and activities of associated research centres (such as the Centre for Sport, Spirituality and Character Development at Neumann College, Philadelphia, in the United States, and the Centre for the Study of Sport and Spirituality at York St John University College, York, in England), pre-date the 2016 Congress at York. And, of course, serious academic analysis (inclusive of philosophical considerations of play and leisure) by trail-blazing historians and sociologists can be traced back at least to the first half of the twentieth century.⁷

With the partial exception of Michael Krüger’s paper, the concern here is with the years from the later nineteenth to the early twenty-first centuries. This period saw the emergence of the modern sporting world, including the global diffusion of the world sports of today, commercialization and professionalization, and increasing international competition. Five themes have been prominent in histories of Christianity and sport in this modern sporting world. First, much has been written about the movement known as ‘Muscular Christianity’ which arose in the 1850s and 1860s in Britain and the United States, the countries in which a high proportion of the world sports of today have their origins.⁸ Second, historians have examined the role of the churches in relation to the rather different lines of sporting development in many parts of continental Europe. These differed in two major ways from the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ pattern: gymnastics played a larger role, and for a time were more important

than team-sports ('English Sports' as they were sometimes called); and politics shaped sport much more directly in such countries as France or Germany than in Britain or the United States. The politics often had a major religious dimension. In France, for example, in the early twentieth century, sport was mainly organized through three mutually antagonistic federations, Republican, Catholic and Socialist.⁹ Third, an important theme of sports history in recent years has been the part played by Christian missions and schools in the diffusion of European and American sports in Asia, Africa and Latin America.¹⁰ Fourth, historians have shown how sport offered an arena in which rivalries between different Christian denominations and different religions, or between Christians and Secularists, could be played out, and one which may have exacerbated these antagonisms.¹¹ And fifth, they have shown how the popularity of sport has been exploited by the churches. Since the later nineteenth century Christian athletes have been favourite role-models, and their faith has been seen as an advertisement for Christianity.¹²

Historians of Christianity and sport have tried to answer one or more of the following three key questions:

(1) What were the reasons for the embrace of sport by the Christian churches from the later nineteenth century onwards? The explanations offered have been many, and sometimes contradictory. Among the most common lines of interpretation have been to see it as an aspect of the liberalization of Christian theology,¹³ or to see it as a 'masculinist' reaction to the perceived 'feminisation' of the churches,¹⁴ or to see it as part of the church's response to anti-clerical politics.¹⁵ Not that these explanations need to be mutually exclusive. The liberalization argument has mainly been advanced with regard to Protestantism, and gains support from the fact that the longest resistance came from the more conservative Protestant churches;¹⁶ but it raises the question of why many conservative Catholics, including a succession of popes, have also been sports enthusiasts.¹⁷ The masculinity argument raises the question of when, how and why 'muscular Christians' have also championed women's sport.¹⁸ The political interpretation

works very well for certain countries, such as France, but is less relevant to places where anti-clericalism was less of a force.

(2) Has the role of the Christian churches in the rise of modern sport been proactive and creative, or has it been a defensive damage-limitation exercise? The latter view is strongly argued by Callum Brown, who suggests that Muscular Christianity was a ‘tactical shift’, and that the church remained hostile to games and to the body.¹⁹ Some other historians of sport and leisure have played down the influence of the churches in sport’s modern history either by largely ignoring them,²⁰ or by arguing that this influence was short-lived.²¹ On the other hand, local studies in England have tended to highlight the importance of religious organizations in the early development of modern sport,²² or to show that this role continued for much longer.²³ While the importance of Christianity in the history of European and American sport is at least open to debate, it was unquestionably a major factor in the wider diffusion of sports originating in those countries. In many parts of the world, Christian missionaries and teachers and officials of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) were among the first to play cricket, football, hockey, volleyball, baseball or basketball in their locations. There is room for debate about the motives of these Christian sports enthusiasts and the kind of sporting ethos which they tried to inculcate, but nobody could argue that their role was merely defensive or reactive.²⁴

(3) How far has Christianity been changed by its embrace of sport, and have the changes been on balance good or bad? For some historians, both Christianity and sport are evidently forces for good, and their relationship is seen as entirely beneficial.²⁵ Many others, while not ignoring potentially darker sides to the relationship, offer a mainly positive view.²⁶ The contrary view is offered by Dominic Erdozain. He grants that Muscular Christianity began as a justifiable reaction against the puritanical excesses of early nineteenth-century Evangelicalism, but he argues that when later nineteenth-century churches and, in particular,

the YMCA adopted a 'mission' to promote sport, they were fatally diverted from more important concerns. The result was an internal secularisation of Christianity.²⁷ In the United States the active involvement of the Evangelical churches in the world of sport, especially since the 1970s, has led to considerable controversy, with some historians and sociologists (as well as theologians) criticizing what they see as an uncritical acceptance of the less savoury aspects of sport.²⁸ Each of the papers published here offers answers to some of the questions mentioned above.

The collection begins with Michael Krüger's timely reflections on the 500th jubilee of Martin Luther's propagation of his 95 theses against the Pope, and crucial arguments associated with the Protestant Reformation. As he notes, this event provides an ideal opportunity to consider the relationship between sport and Christianity from the perspective of both German Lutheranism and Protestantism, and the German-specific body-culture of gymnastics and *Turnen*. His conclusion is that both aspects fundamentally influenced the development of modern sports and Christian religiosity worldwide.

Alexander Maurits and Martin Nykvist then move forward in time, changing the focus of attention to Sweden, where a 'sport movement', initially perceived as a rival to the Church of Sweden (the Lutheran state church), was consolidated in the early decades of the twentieth century. However, as they explain, the sport movement grew, and conspicuous representatives within the Church of Sweden and other Christian denominations adopted a more practical view of the movement in order to appeal to people outside the ranks of the church, especially young men. In effect, the sport field soon became a missionary field. Concomitantly, the authors account for collaborative as well as sceptical voices, not only in the Church of Sweden, but also within the substantial Swedish revival movements (namely, the Pentecostal movement and the Mission Covenant Church of Sweden). In addition, and perhaps more poignantly, they

analyze these events from a gender perspective, discussing what was simultaneously perceived as the secularization and feminization of Swedish Christianity.

In a completely different setting, Huijie Zhang, Fan Hong and Fuhua Huang survey how missionary educational institutions and the education and sport programmes of the YMCA, in conjunction with the nation-building project of the Nationalist government, transformed and modernized physical education and sport in China from 1840 to 1937. The concepts of cultural imperialism and nationalism are central to this study, and the authors argue that the cultural imperialism model is ineffective for an understanding of the impact of missionaries on Chinese society. Instead, they posit that the way in which Chinese nationalism played an active role in resisting, selecting and reshaping the cultural products (modern physical education and sport) evidences a process that was an active negotiation, rather than a passive acceptance, of Western culture. Nevertheless, as they explain, Christian physical education and sport programmes had long-lasting effects on how physical education and sports became the way to define 'modern' bodies as they were incorporated into the wider education programme of modernizing China under the Nationalist government.

In another location, in a much more confined time period, missionaries of a different ilk were also involved in promoting sport, although perhaps in a more conspicuous way. As Ryan Davis elucidates, in 1938, Mormon missionaries from North America formed an athletic club in Buenos Aires, Argentina. It sponsored professional teams in baseball, softball, and basketball. Their team won three league championships in the four years they played baseball and four championships in the five years they played softball. Two of their basketball players would become national all-stars, one of whom would represent Argentina at the South American Championship in 1940. This story, extending until 1943, is outlined and situated in relation to a range of discourses that, interlaced, constitute important episodes in the cultural context of modern Argentine sport.

The final two papers take a closer look at aspects of Catholicism and sport. In the case study presented by Melissa Walsh and Nicholas Marshall, they examine the philosophies and activities of the Young Christian Workers (YCW), an international movement for young Catholics. From the 1950s through to the 1980s, the Australian YCW became known for running campaigns on a range of social issues and the provision of services – including sporting events and competitions. In their paper, Walsh and Marshall focus attention on the development of the Australian YCW (Australian Rules) Football Association during the 1950s, and trace the history of YCW members' participation in public debates about the morality of Sunday sport, which climaxed with a local referendum in the Melbourne suburb of Camberwell in 1959. Drawing on archival materials and interviews conducted with former young workers, their paper deftly explores tensions within Christianity around the meaning of 'leisure', 'idleness', and Sunday as a day of observance and rest, showing how religious strains around Sunday sport were shaped by class, youth and masculine identities.

Finally, Michał Mazurkiewicz brings the volume up to the present day by returning to Europe and looking at more topical historical developments regarding the religious side of Polish football. His paper includes several aspects, including discussion on the policy of the Catholic Church towards sport in recent decades, the rise of sports chaplaincy, and public manifestations of the religious beliefs of football players, managers, and fans. The main focus of interest is, however, on the increasingly popular religious pilgrimages organized since 2008 by fans across a number of Polish football clubs.

To conclude, it is worth noting that the investigations in this volume are not limited to a narrow definition of Christianity, but encompass a wide range of denominations, related philosophies and viewpoints. In terms of variety, it is also noted that different methodological and theoretical approaches are adopted, and, given the existing state of play, it is clear that there is still much to be uncovered, documented, and written about when it comes to the

enduring topic of sport and Christianity. The inference is that any research agenda which emerges from observations on historical perspectives concerning the relationship of sport with aspects of Christianity will continue to resonate and add value to wider understandings of sport, culture and the human condition.

Notes on Contributors

Hugh McLeod is Emeritus Professor of Church History at the University of Birmingham and the author of articles on the history of sport and religion. His most recent book, which he edited jointly with David Hempton, is *Secularization and Religious Innovation in the North Atlantic World* (2017).

d.h.mcleod@bham.ac.uk

Nils Martinius Justvik is an Associate Professor of History at the University of Agder, Norway. His doctoral thesis, originally published in Norwegian, was subsequently published as a book in English as *Protestantism and Sport in the 'Bible Belt' of Norway in the First Half of the Twentieth Century* (2018).

nils.justivik@uia.no

Rob Hess is an Adjunct Associate Professor of Sports History with the College of Sport and Exercise Science and the Institute for Health and Sport at Victoria University. His most recent book, which he co-authored with Dale Blair, is *Australian Rules Football During the First World War* (2017).

Robert.Hess@vu.edu.au

¹ Nick J. Watson and Andrew Parker, *Sport and the Christian Religion: A Systematic Review of Literature* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 119.

² *Inaugural Global Congress on Sports and Christianity Handbook* (York: Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, York St John University, United Kingdom, 24-28 August 2016), 1.

³ The authors of this paper wish to thank Nick Watson for his key role in conceptualizing and arranging the Congress, and for his willingness to include a specific strand devoted to 'Historical Perspectives on Sports and Christianity'. His published works (often in collaboration with Andrew Parker) and his encouragement of relevant academic networks have also had a defining and beneficial influence on the development of the field.

⁴ Watson and Parker, *Sport and the Christian Religion*, 119.

⁵ Apart from Watson and Parker's bibliographical compilation, *Sport and the Christian Religion*, see also the oft-cited Nick J. Watson and Andrew Parker, 'Sports and Christianity: Mapping the Field', in Nick J. Watson and Andrew Parker (eds), *Sports and Christianity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 9-88. For an appraisal of the latter work, see Rob Hess, 'Review of N.J. Watson and Andrew Parker (eds), *Sports and Christianity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*', *Sporting Traditions* 30, no. 2 (2013), 119-121. Also especially relevant is Part III ('Western Perspectives on Sport and Christianity') of the recently published collection, Afe Adogame, Nick J. Watson and Andrew Parker (eds), *Global Perspectives on Sports and Christianity* (London: Routledge, 2018).

⁶ Manfred Lammer, Maureen Smith and Thierry Terret, 'Introduction', *Stadion* 35 (2009), 2.

⁷ See, for example, Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1949 [Originally published in 1938]), and Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (London: Pantheon Books, 1952 [Originally published in 1947]).

⁸ For two examples from the large array of literature, see Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), and Malcolm Tozer, *The Ideal of Manliness* (Truro: Sunnyrest Books, 2015).

⁹ Richard Holt, *Sport and Society in Modern France* (London: Macmillan, 1981); Hugh McLeod, 'Muscular Christianity, European and American', in David Hempton and Hugh McLeod (eds), *Secularization and Religious Innovation in the North Atlantic World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 203.

¹⁰ See, for example, Nam-Gil Ha and J.A. Mangan, 'A Curious Conjunction – Sport, Religion and Nationalism: Christianity and the Modern History of Korea', *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 11, no. 3 (1994), 329-354; Markku Hokkanen, "'Christ and the Imperial Games Fields" in South-Central Africa – Sport and the Scottish Missionaries in Malawi, 1880-1914: Utilitarian Compromise', *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 22, no. 4 (2005), 745-769.

¹¹ Hugh McLeod, 'Religion, Politics and Sport in Western Europe, c.1870-1939', in Stewart J. Brown, Frances Knight and John Morgan-Guy (eds), *Religion, Identity and Conflict in Britain* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 195-212; for cricket and conflict in a multi-religious context, see Ramachandra Guha, *A Corner of a Foreign Field: The Indian History of a British Sport* (London: Picador, 2002).

¹² See, for example, Stefano Pivato, 'Italian Cycling and the Creation of a Catholic Hero: The Bartali Myth', *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 13, no. 1 (1996), 128-138.

¹³ Norman Vance, *Sinews of the Spirit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

¹⁴ Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 2-3.

¹⁵ Laurence Munoz, *Une histoire du sport catholique* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003).

¹⁶ Andrew Doyle, 'Foolish and Useless Sport: The Southern Evangelical Crusade against Intercollegiate Football', *Journal of Sport History* 24, no. 3 (1997), 320-323, 337; Dominic Erdozain, *The Problem of Pleasure* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2010), 240-247.

¹⁷ Kevin Lixey, 'The Vatican's Game Plan for Maximizing Sport's Educational Potential', in Nick J. Watson and Andrew Parker (eds), *Sports and Christianity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2013), 250-268.

¹⁸ Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 148, notes the importance of the Young Women's Christian Association in the development of women's sport in the United States – a theme neglected alike by historians of sport, of women and of religion.

¹⁹ Callum Brown, 'God and Games – Yin and Yang', paper delivered at a conference on 'Historians on Sport', Leicester, 29 October 2005; see also Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain* (London: Routledge, 2001), 97-98, 107-108.

²⁰ Mike Huggins, *The Victorians and Sport* (London: Hambledon and London, 2004); Wolfgang Behringer, *Kulturgeschichte des Sports: Vom antiken Olympia bis ins 21. Jahrhundert* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2012).

²¹ Peter Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational Recreation and the Contest for Control, 1830-1885* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).

²² Douglas Reid, 'Labour, Leisure and Politics in Birmingham, ca. 1800-1875' (PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 1985); Jeremy Crump, 'Amusements of the People: Leicester, 1850-194' (PhD diss., University of Warwick, 1985).

²³ Jack Williams, 'Churches, Identities and Sport in the North, 1900-1939', in Jeff Hill and Jack Williams (eds), *Sport and Identity in the North of England* (Keele: Keele University Press, 1996), 113-136.

²⁴ David Goldblatt, *The Ball is Round: A Global History of Football* (London: Viking, 2006), 479, 484-485; Gerald R. Gems, 'The Athletic Crusade: Sport and Colonialism in the Philippines', *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 21, no. 1 (2004), 1-15; A.D. Downes, "'From Boys to Men": Colonial Education, Cricket and Masculinity in the Caribbean, 1870-c. 1920', *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 22, no. 1 (2005), 3-21.

²⁵ Peter Lupson, *Thank God for Football!* (London: SPCK, 2006).

²⁶ See, for example, William J. Baker, *Playing with God: Religion and Modern Sport* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

²⁷ Erdozain, *The Problem of Pleasure*.

²⁸ Tony Ladd and James A. Mathiesen, *Evangelical Protestants and the Development of Modern Sport* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999); more frankly hostile is Robert J. Higgs, *God and the Stadium* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1995).