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1     **“Don’t ever mix God with sports”: Christian religion in athletes’ stories of life transitions**

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3     Noora J. Ronkainen, Tatiana V. Ryba & David Tod (2019) ‘Don’t ever mix God with sports’:  
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6

7     **Abstract**

8     Sport psychology researchers have increasingly recognised the need to adopt a holistic  
9     perspective when seeking to understand athletes’ adaptation to life transitions. The present study  
10    sought to understand how religion influences athletes’ journeys in sport and experiences of life  
11    transitions. Two Christian elite athletes participated in life story interviews which we analysed  
12    via narrative analysis. Although the participants narratively separated religious belief from sport,  
13    religion, as a source of basic world assumptions and values, provided a broader framework of  
14    meaning and continuity in their sport lives. Yet, both stories involved a growing distance to  
15    institutional religious practices and movement towards individualised religiosity as they  
16    traversed cultural and developmental transitions. For applied practitioners, it is important to be  
17    aware of the unique ways in which religion influences the sport life, and to recognise personal  
18    and cultural attitudes that will shape their applied work with religious athletes.

19

20    Keywords: Christianity, career transition, life meaning, athletic identity, adaptation

## 21 **“Don’t ever mix God with sports”:** Christian religion in athletes’ stories of life transitions

22 Research into athletes’ developmental trajectories has diversified in recent years, and there has  
23 been an emerging sensitivity to athletes’ broader frameworks of life meaning and how they shape  
24 sporting experiences (Blodgett, Ge, Schinke, & McGannon, 2017; Ryba, Schinke, Stambulova, &  
25 Elbe, 2017; Schinke et al., 2007). A number of researchers have acknowledged the need to adopt  
26 “a whole person” perspective in order to understand how people respond and adapt to transitions  
27 in sport life (Knowles & Lorimer, 2014; Stambulova, 2017). Although religiosity has been argued  
28 to play a central role in individual career decision-making processes, overall life course  
29 development (Richmond, 2016) and adaptation to life transitions (Pargament, 2001), it remains  
30 one of the less studied dimensions of athletes’ life-worlds and career development trajectories.  
31 This paper contributes to filling this gap by studying the role of religion, understood as the beliefs,  
32 practices, values and communities that are related to the transcendent (Saroglou, 2011), in athletes’  
33 life narratives and experiences of life transitions.

34 Although no studies have specifically focused on religion in relation to athletes’ career  
35 development and transitions, a few studies in psychology and sociology of sport have provided  
36 accounts of how religion and sport intersect. Most often, studies and applied reflections have  
37 illustrated the powerful influence of religion on sporting experience. That is, religious athletes may  
38 experience their sporting talent as a gift from God (Balague, 1999; Mosley, Frierson, Cheng, &  
39 Aoyagi, 2015) and interpret their daily experiences in sport through their religious framework of  
40 life meaning (Blodgett et al., 2017; Mosley et al., 2015; Nesti, 2011). Furthermore, a body of  
41 literature has explored religious practices such as prayer and their role in athletes’ mental  
42 preparation to competitions (Czech & Bullet, 2007; Czech, Wrisberg, Fisher, Thompson, & Hayes,  
43 2004; Schinke et al., 2007; Vernacchia, McGuire, Reardon, & Templin, 2000). Religion has been

44 moreover reported to be an important source of meaning for some athletes when facing critical  
45 moments such as injury or poor performance (Grindstaff, Wrisberg, & Ross, 2010; Nesti, 2011;  
46 Vernacchia et al., 2000).

47 Stevenson's (1991) sociological study also identified three different ways in which Christian  
48 athletes in Canada negotiated their religious and sporting identities. The first type he identified  
49 was *the segregated type*, referring to athletes who almost entirely separated these two life contexts  
50 and identities. These athletes only expressed their Christianity in a religious community and  
51 explained that sport had its own ethics that need not be congruent with Christian values. Some  
52 talked about how they "leave God on the sidelines" (p. 366) and did not see a problem in hurting  
53 an opponent. The second, and dominant type was *the selective type* where athletes could express  
54 their religious identity in some sporting situations, but the athletic identity and sport-specific ethics  
55 mostly took precedence in a sport context. For example, one athlete explained that in order to  
56 survive in sport, "you've got to be downright mean sometimes" (p. 367); however, most often  
57 athletes maintained that the sport practices should be within the rules of the game, felt that religion  
58 helped them to cope with winning and losing, and some talked about "winning for God" and  
59 "giving glory to God" (p. 368). Finally, a few athletes were identified as *the committed type* for  
60 whom the Christian identity was considered to have the primacy in all contexts of life. These  
61 athletes talked about always being accountable to God and the overriding importance of religion  
62 over sport. However, some athletes admitted sometimes compromising their Christian identity to  
63 be accepted in the team, and some of them had ultimately decided to retire from sport to resolve  
64 the dissonance between these two identities.

65 Whilst research in sport psychology has often considered religion as a unified construct, or  
66 focused on one aspect of religion only (e.g., prayer), scholarship in psychology of religion has

67 sought to distinguish different dimensions of religion to gain a more nuanced understanding of  
68 how religion manifests in individual lives (Glock, 1962; Saroglou, 2011). Saroglou (2011)  
69 suggested to that religion could be analytically divided into four distinct, yet inter-related  
70 components: (1) *believing* (in some form of transcendence, basic world assumptions, and  
71 meaningfulness of life); (2) *bonding* (with a deeper reality, others and/or the ‘inner’ self, often  
72 through religious rituals such as prayer, meditation or worship); (3) *behaving* (in line with specific  
73 norms and moral standards derived from religion); and (4) *belonging* (in a community of believers  
74 that is shaped by tradition and imagined glorious future). These dimensions were suggested to  
75 represent the cognitive, emotional, moral, and social elements of religion, respectively. Yet there  
76 could be large cultural variance on the salience of different dimensions of religiosity. For example,  
77 liberal European Protestantism has typically emphasised individual belief, whereas morality has  
78 been a dominant dimension in conservative Protestantism in the U.S. (Saroglou, 2011).  
79 Catholicism, on the other hand, has been described as a practice-based religion in Canada where  
80 one of our participants had grown up (Beaman, 2012). At the same time, especially for  
81 transnational migrants, the religious experience is often shaped by global circulation of religious  
82 ideas and practices rather than the family tradition or country of origin alone (Levitt, Lucken, &  
83 Barnett, 2011).

84 To sum up, even though religion is increasingly recognised as a central dimension of life  
85 meaning for many athletes (Balague, 1999; Nesti, 2011; Sarkar, Hill, Parker, 2015), no studies in  
86 sport psychology have explored religion’s role in shaping athletes’ life trajectories in sport and  
87 experiences of life transitions. Building upon Stevenson’s (1991) typology of how Christian  
88 athletes negotiate their religious and sporting identities, as well as the multidimensional framework  
89 of religion (Saroglou, 2011), the present study seeks to expand understandings of how Christian

90 religion shapes athletes' journeys in sport. The following research questions guided our inquiry:  
91 How do Christian athletes understand the relationship between religion (as believing, behaving,  
92 bonding, and belonging) and sport? How can their stories be understood in relation to Stevenson's  
93 (1991) three types of identity negotiation (segregated, selective, and committed)? How do the  
94 various dimensions of religion shift within athletes' developmental journeys and life transitions?

### 95 **Methodology**

96 Our analytic work is based on an existential psychological view on narrative theory, where  
97 the search for meaning is understood as a basic condition of human existence (Richert, 2010).  
98 Although meaning is *lived* – that is, it is found in our concrete actions and engagement in the  
99 world – it is at the same time generated in reflection and language. In other words, our story-  
100 telling activity locates us in a particular socio-cultural setting which provides us with a horizon  
101 of understanding (Richert, 2010). This implies that meanings are enabled or constrained by our  
102 embodied capabilities and limitations, but also culturally constituted in that our storytelling is  
103 shaped by cultural narrative resources that are accessible to us (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). The  
104 (sub)cultural narrative resources guide us in constructing explanations that 'make sense' and help  
105 us in selecting events and experiences that 'should' be included in telling a life story to a  
106 particular audience (McAdams, 2008).

107 The life story approach (Atkinson, 2002) takes seriously the storied nature of human life and  
108 allows for understanding how individuals negotiate change and continuity in their sense of self  
109 and life unfolding. The need to understand athletes' transition experiences in the broader context  
110 of their lives has been highlighted by a number of scholars, both in terms of their personal  
111 biographies as well as their socio-cultural locations (e.g., Stambulova, 2017). Carless and  
112 Douglas (2009) argued that "the ways career transition affects an individual is best understood in

113 light of earlier events in her or his life, the personal meaning of sport, and the potential impact of  
114 co-occurring transitions” (p. 52), whilst also warning that the dominant ‘performance narrative’  
115 of elite sport could have serious implications for athletes’ mental health as it directed athletes to  
116 develop a narrow sense of self-worth contingent on athletic success. Since the life story  
117 perspective “enables us to see and identify threads and links that connect one part of a person’s  
118 life to another” (Atkinson, 2002, p.126), it is a particularly useful approach for understanding  
119 how people respond to life transitions and what sustains or threatens adaptation and well-being.  
120 For this study, the particular focus was on religion and its implications for experiences of life  
121 transitions in athletes’ developmental trajectories.

## 122 *Participants*

123 The participants of the study were selected from broader life story research that the first  
124 and the second author conducted on athletes’ career experiences in the Nordic region. Our  
125 research involved a total of 25 athletes of various nationalities who had practised their sport in  
126 the Nordic countries. The study aimed to gain a holistic understanding of these athletes and their  
127 life concerns, including religion and spirituality (if these were relevant identities for the  
128 participants). For two athletes, religion emerged as a salient aspect of who they were, and they  
129 were selected as the focus of the current comparative case study due to the richness of their  
130 stories in relation to the religious dimension of their lives.

131 “Vincent” (a pseudonym) is a French Canadian, Catholic, 36 years old, professional ice  
132 hockey player whose athletic career has taken him to three different continents. At the time of the  
133 interviews, Vincent was living and playing in a Nordic country for the second time in his career,  
134 while his a wife and their children were living in North America. “Lucas” (pseudonym) is a 34  
135 years old distance runner from a Nordic country. He is a Protestant (Lutheran) Christian who had

136 lived in an African country in his childhood. He started running after his family's return  
137 migration and has since lived in different places while pursuing education and his athletic career.  
138 At the time of the interviews, he was competing at the national level.

### 139 *Procedure*

140 We chose a life story perspective because it offers a holistic approach that seeks to locate  
141 specific events and experiences in the participants' broader biography and their frameworks of  
142 meaning. Life story interviews generally aim to follow the interviewees' conceptions and  
143 discourse (rather than researchers' conceptual frameworks) and capture how they interpret things  
144 and events in their lives (Tagg, 1985). "Vincent" was interviewed by the 2<sup>nd</sup> author (name), and  
145 "Lucas" was interviewed by the 1<sup>st</sup> author (name). Both athletes participated in two interview  
146 sessions each lasting approximately two hours. The interviews loosely followed a chronological  
147 approach, where participants were invited to share their stories in their own preferred words,  
148 starting from sharing early childhood experiences and memories of family life, friends and  
149 school. From there, storytelling moved to educational choices, sports activities, relationships and  
150 career development in and outside of sport.

151 "Lucas" located his childhood story directly in a religious community where he had  
152 grown up, whereas "Vincent" only started to share stories on religion after interviewer's probe  
153 into this topic in the second interview after he had mentioned religion outside of the formal  
154 interview. However, once we asked participants to tell more about this aspect of their lives, they  
155 were articulate in reflecting on their religious backgrounds and their meaning. Therefore, we  
156 asked them to share more stories in relation to their religious beliefs, values and practices and  
157 how they felt that religion related to their sporting life projects, if at all. Participants were also  
158 invited to elaborate on various turning points in their life stories, the most challenging transition



159 they had experienced, and how they had adapted to different transitions in their lives. In closing,  
160 we asked the athletes to think about their future and share their hopes and aspirations. The stories  
161 included a number of transition episodes which allowed us to search for and identify patterns in  
162 how the athletes constructed meanings and reconstructed daily practices when transitioning into  
163 a new life situation.

#### 164 *Data analysis*

165 After the transcriptions had been completed, we spent extensive time on analysing the  
166 athletes' stories and discussing them in research meetings. Our main analytic strategy was based  
167 on narrative analysis of structure, which seeks to identify the key structures or patterns that hold  
168 the personal stories together (Riessman, 2008; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). We sought to identify the  
169 structures of the religious identity narratives, athletic identity narratives and the more 'global'  
170 self-narratives, and how these various storylines evolved and intersected in the storytelling. As a  
171 part of the structural narrative analysis, we employed Stevenson's (1991) and Saroglou's (2011)  
172 frameworks to analytically distinguish the identity claims that were made and whether and how  
173 different dimensions of religion were integrated to athletes' narratives. Stevenson's typology of  
174 Christian athletes' identities (segregated, selective, and committed) was first employed to discern  
175 the extent of identity intersection in athletes' life narratives and how the stories surrounding their  
176 athletic and religious identities were structured. Secondly, we read the stories for identifying the  
177 presence or absence of different dimensions of religion (believing, bonding, behaving, and  
178 belonging) and how they were woven into the overall plot of the story. This involved noting  
179 aspects of actual daily practices (church attendance, sports training, family interactions, and  
180 encounters with other people) and ideational claims about personal beliefs and values.

181 Our second analytic interest was on discerning the performative elements of the stories – that

182 is, what the storytellers chose to include in their stories, what they appeared to achieve by telling  
183 these stories, and how religious identities and life transitions were constructed in the telling  
184 (Riessman, 2008). We also paid attention to how our probes and questions served to co-construct  
185 the stories. Being reflexive that the researcher is always jointly producing the telling, rather than  
186 simply hearing/receiving the participant's story, is central to the performative analysis of  
187 narrative. In the following analysis, we will show both the 'whats' (story plots and structures)  
188 and the 'hows' (the intersubjective contexts) of our participants' life stories.

## 189 **Results**

190 Since the focus our study was on understanding (1) how the athletes understood the  
191 relationship between religion and sport and (2) how these identities intersect (3) in the course of  
192 their lives, our representation of the results is a reconstruction of the chronology of participants'  
193 life stories which allows for discerning the processes associated with the first two questions. The  
194 first section addresses the stories from childhood and adolescence that first establish the  
195 storylines surrounding religion and sport. The second section considers the developmental period  
196 of late adolescence and early adulthood when identity questions and career choices become a  
197 central concern. In the final section, we analyse athletes' stories about the present and their future  
198 orientation to understand their current patterns of meaning-making and religious practice.

### 199 **Religion and sport in early life: "Don't ever mix God with Sports!"**

200 The religious dimension in Vincent's life story only becomes explicit in the second  
201 interview, which [2<sup>nd</sup> author, name] opens by saying: "So, I would like to start today by  
202 exploring with you the cultural and religious influences in your life. [Off the tape,] we talked  
203 about you being Catholic, which is why I feel free to say religious influences as well". In  
204 response, Vincent tells a story about growing up in a Catholic, "very close family" where religion  
205 was actively lived and practised. He shared memories of going to church, saying individual

206 prayers, “we thought that was important”, and talked about Christian values that shaped family  
207 life. His parents emphasised the need to acquire a good education, but ice hockey soon becomes  
208 the central part of his subjective life design and one which (alongside education) is supported by  
209 his father. However, although his father is a religious man and at the same time passionate about  
210 sport, Vincent remembers learning from a young age that sport and religion are not something to  
211 be mixed: “My dad always told me, ‘don’t ever mix God with sports’, ‘don’t ever ask God to  
212 help you on the ice – he’s got way more important things to think about than you doing good in  
213 sports’”. The way in which Vincent makes sense of his father's words is to construct sport as a  
214 fully human endeavour:

215       That [ice hockey] is something that’s me – that I decided to do, something that I enjoyed  
216       to do. And you develop a talent for that, and I don’t think God gives you that talent. I  
217       think it’s something we develop as humans – it’s more a scientific thing, I think.

218 This story structure develops early in his life story and gives shape to his career narrative in  
219 sport, which emphasises secular assets such as, personal agency, internal strength, and social  
220 support, rather than a sense of destiny, calling, or guidance. However, he equally emphasises that  
221 sport, just as life in general, has to be lived and practised with the right values – for example, the  
222 disdain for laziness (which is a Biblical theme) applies to sport, too. Again, his father is a guiding  
223 figure in shaping his moral understanding of the game:

224       My dad was a strict but a loving father... He taught you the right values, and the value of  
225       working hard, not being lazy, in life and in playing sport. [...] I was young, maybe 10-11,  
226       and I just remember him saying, in the car, [...] “I’ll tolerate you playing bad, that  
227       happens, but when you’re lazy, I will not accept it – I want you to work hard, but if you  
228       have a bad game, you have a bad game. I’ll never be mad at you for that, but don’t ever

229 be lazy, because, you know, that is cheating everybody and that's not right – it's a team  
230 sport.

231 In the informal talks prior to the tape-recorded interviews, [1<sup>st</sup> author, name] had  
232 mentioned to Lucas that she had studied theology and previously conducted research on  
233 spirituality in sport. However, similar to Vincent, Lucas didn't quickly delve into religious or  
234 spiritual themes but started by sharing his memories of family life, friendships, sport, and school.  
235 However, his childhood and early adolescence took place in an explicitly religious context as his  
236 parents were missionary workers and they lived in a closed religious community in an Africa  
237 country. Whereas Vincent had emphasised values and practices (prayer and church-going), in  
238 Lucas's narrative religion is most strongly present as the community within which he is  
239 embedded. He describes his parents and his upbringing as "conservative" and recalls that sport  
240 was not an important part of the shared family life. Similar to Vincent, he also constructs a  
241 potential tension between belief and sport:

242 I've heard or got an impression that in some religious families the parents might ban the  
243 child from taking part in sport. That belief is a spiritual thing whereas sport is only  
244 physique (...) In our family, they never prohibited taking part [in sport], but in the  
245 beginning, they didn't really encourage it either. It was my own choice. [And] even  
246 though my father is a pastor, he has never said that sport is a bad thing.

247 The first time sport enters his story is after they had moved to an African country, where  
248 "the first time I got to know the local kids was through football... through playing football we got  
249 along very well". A story starts to develop where sport becomes a way for him to make a contact  
250 with the new place and its people and find embodied pleasure. A turning point in his sporting  
251 story is when he gets a tennis teacher at the end of primary school and starts to play regularly: "it

252 was a big thing. I found sport, or sport found me (...) I enjoyed the hard training”. He remembers  
253 his father being involved in building the tennis court, but other than that he constructs sport as  
254 his own and a secular thing - a storyline which becomes a central life theme. Although sport is  
255 played with people who are also members of the religious community, the meaning of sport is  
256 not explicitly connected to a religious framework.

257 In summary, in their early stories, both athletes constructed sport as a way of developing  
258 one’s secular talent including physical and psychological capabilities, thus separating it on a  
259 cognitive level from religion. At the same time, very different trajectories are emerging, whereas  
260 Vincent’s athletic development is shaped by a future perspective of a professional career within  
261 performance narratives of elite sport, Lucas’s sport involvement is constructed as an effortful,  
262 but yet leisurely pursuit without a ‘career’ orientation. This differentiation continues as they  
263 move into early adolescence and adulthood.

#### 264 **From adolescence to early adulthood: key moments in the shaping of the life course**

265 Lucas’s family migrated back to their home country in his adolescence, which he described  
266 bluntly as “a shock”. Being separated from a closed religious community, he now starts studying  
267 in a public school where other students are different: “the others were swearing and I wasn't used  
268 to hearing that, they were disturbing the lessons. Making noise and all that what I could not  
269 understand at all”. The values of respect and good manners (including not swearing) that are part  
270 of his Christian home culture become conflicted with the secular school culture, making it  
271 difficult for him to fit in. Adaptation is challenging for him also because he is approaching a  
272 concurrent transition in his educational pathway: “I didn't know what I wanted to study and do  
273 afterwards”. In this crossroad, sport becomes an important embodied anchor to the new place  
274 that provides him with a sense of direction and inspiration: “A friend was a national level youth

275 athlete and he inspired me. I went out for some runs and was hooked. I was quite soon running  
276 100 km a week”. Looking back, he chooses the initiation of his running career as the biggest  
277 turning point in his life, constructing a strong link between sport and his adaptation to the  
278 challenging life transition:

279       Yes, running was a way to adapt when we moved back from Africa. I always had a desire  
280       to move and now I had a way to channel it. A pair of shoes and a tracksuit is all you need.  
281       And through that, I could release my energy. On those runs, I was then reflecting on the  
282       change and adaptation and everything that is related to it. (...) And I got a couple of  
283       friends through running.

284 The immersion into the competitive running culture through his friend, however, also introduces  
285 him to performance narratives of sport which had not been a part of his lifeworld pre-migration.

286 As he recalls:

287       I was so green, I knew nothing about high-performance sports. About seconds or  
288       anything. Two minutes in 800 metres, good or bad time, I didn't know. I didn't even  
289       know that many distance runners come from African countries, having lived there myself.

290 Although being introduced to the performance dimension of sport and embracing the desire to  
291 test out his athletic potential, his embodied experiences and narrative resources allow him to  
292 resist the monological stories of running as *only* minutes and seconds. He stories his resistance as  
293 a result of his maturity (through becoming immersed in competitive sport only in late  
294 adolescence). However, from then on, competitive running becomes his central life theme  
295 carrying through studies in a community college in another city, then moving again, starting  
296 university studies, and going to a student exchange in another European country. At the same  
297 time, being an athlete and living an athletes' life with early morning runs fits his family norms

298 and their Christian lifestyle whereas partying and alcohol consumption was something frowned  
299 upon: “My parents still don’t really approve of alcohol at all (...) I had my first beer sometime in  
300 my exchange year”. He talks about conflicts that some religious adolescents may face by  
301 “missing out” from “normal” adolescent activities but reflects that sport has helped him in this  
302 regard: “it [the sport] has given perspective and I’ve got friends through sport. Before [starting  
303 running], all my friends were from the religious community. So I learned that they are also  
304 normal people, the non-religious ones”.

305 Vincent’s life trajectory becomes shaped by elite sport development from a young age, and  
306 he soon starts to design his life around the professionalised athletic career narrative. His parents  
307 approve his trajectory to an extent that it can even override the family’s religious practices. As he  
308 recalls:

309 We went to church almost every Sunday until I can remember. The only time we stopped  
310 going was when my hockey got more and more serious and I was playing and I was away,  
311 so there was less and less time at the church.

312 At the age of 16, he gets an opportunity to move to another city to play in a league which is  
313 heavily scouted by universities, and soon gets a contract to play and study in a US university. For  
314 him, the choice to pursue a dual career track at university, rather than a hockey-only pathway, is  
315 constructed solely as a way to fulfil his parents’ expectations on receiving a good education,  
316 rather than a personal ambition. This relational narrative – emphasising the family (religious)  
317 values and closeness – shapes his story of transitioning into young adulthood:

318 I just think that whole, growing up like that, just kept us really close as a family and made  
319 us feel how family values are important. I left at a young age and I know it was hard on my  
320 mom. It was hard [also] on me, but me, I’m a young man and living my life, starting my

321 young adult life, but for my mom, it was hard for her kids to go away from the nest. I felt  
322 there was more of a trying to make sure I'm – they're still important in my life.

323 Elsewhere, Lucas's narrative of young adulthood continues with growing independence  
324 and settling to live on his own. He continues to pursue sport with a personal coach and develops  
325 many friendships through running, in which he reaches the top national level. His educational  
326 and professional development is somewhat bumpy with short-term contracts, a period of  
327 unemployment and a return to study in the university, but the running life project provides him  
328 with a stable structure and meaningful goals. Living on his own, he doesn't attend the mass  
329 regularly but doesn't think that this has influenced his personal beliefs in any way. Although he  
330 has predominantly separated religion from sport in terms of beliefs and practices, he mentions  
331 that recently he has actually brought his sport to the church:

332 Sometimes when I have important competitions, for example, I might go to the church, to  
333 get strength and a kind of peace of mind. And if I had a good competition I might go to the  
334 church next Sunday, a little bit like to thank God for it.

335 After telling his story up to date, [1<sup>st</sup> author, name] seeks to inquire how he thinks about religious  
336 influences in the bigger picture of his sport involvement. Although he sees religion as an  
337 important aspect of how he generally views the world, including optimism and hope for the  
338 future, he is hesitant to make very definite links between religion and sport. For example, he  
339 doesn't emotionally relate to accounts of running is a mystical or transcendent experience:

340 "running is 90% work. The kind of spiritualism, it is too far from the reality". [1<sup>st</sup> author, name]  
341 also tells that another research participant has shared a story of a father telling him "not to mix  
342 God with sports", to which he responds:

343 [It can be seen that] religion is a spiritual thing and sport is only physique (...) and so the



344 physique does not make a person any better or it doesn't bring you any closer to heaven,  
345 whereas if you develop yourself spiritually... So this theme is related to Christianity.

346 For Vincent, the pursuit of a professional athletic career leads him to navigate numerous  
347 sport-related relocations whilst trying to sustain close family relationships. He experiences some  
348 setbacks including a severe injury which leaves him out of contract and forces him to look for  
349 opportunities to play outside the prestigious National Hockey League (NHL, top ice hockey  
350 league of North America). The tensions between complex family life and the transnational ice  
351 hockey career become continue shaping his stories up to the present situation. He feels that his  
352 parents have never really supported his marriage, and her child from a previous marriage brings  
353 another tension when they are seeking to arrange their family life across borders. His most  
354 difficult life transition is moving to Russia to play for a season while his family stays behind:  
355 “that was the hardest, hardest thing I’ve ever done”.

356 Vincent talks extensively about challenges in his private life. He also mentions being  
357 increasingly removed from the religious community due to his professional pathway, explaining  
358 that “with my job and being gone and, I play Sundays, I don’t have Sundays off, so we don’t go  
359 to church that much”. Religious practices are furthermore not central to his wife who has been,  
360 for some years, taking care of the children while Vincent is abroad playing hockey. Although  
361 religious values are part of how he hopes to bring up their children, other dimensions of the  
362 religious experience appear to be largely missing.

363 Vincent’s narrative construction of sport is ambiguous, as he once says he loves what he  
364 does, but on other occasions describes it simply as a way of making a living: “it’s my job, but it’s  
365 not the most important thing in my life”. He talks about separating sport life and private life, not  
366 letting situations on the ice affect the home life and vice versa. At the same time, the sporting

367 successes and failures have a strong impact on him, but he tends to keep his feelings to himself.

368 After hearing the life story up to the present situation, [2<sup>nd</sup> author, name] asks him to reflect on  
369 the relationship between his religious life and sport:

370 [2<sup>nd</sup> author, name]: I'm wondering if you have experienced (...) religious influence in  
371 your sport at all? Like, whether that was or has been a factor in your career, in any way.

372 Vincent: Religiously, I don't think so. I don't think I can relate religiously to what I do  
373 now. I think the only way I can relate is like I said, things that you learn how to be as a  
374 human being that has helped me through my career. But also I think it's also not helped  
375 me because you know the expression "good guys come last"? When you're in this kind of  
376 business in a high, high level, I've always experienced that if you're a good guy and you  
377 go along, most of the time it doesn't work (...) I've seen guys that are not good people at  
378 all, that have – maybe didn't deserve, as a human being, to get any kind of chance, and  
379 maybe even their talent wasn't – but for some reason [they did it]. Maybe their arrogance,  
380 showing an air of confidence, and it just – better talkers, knew better how to be – better  
381 communicators with their higher-ups, their coaches.

382 For Vincent, the Christian values of justice, humility and being 'a good person' appear  
383 contradictory to the nature of elite sport and his observation that it could be arrogance and  
384 (over)confidence that brought success. However, throughout the interviews, he maintains that he  
385 has not segregated religious and sporting values, even if he has observed that that is how the elite  
386 sport world seems to work sometimes. He then explains that when he came to a Nordic country,  
387 he had finally found a team where the culture is congruent with his (Christian) values of being a  
388 hard worker and a good person:

389 I fit in so well. I'm more reserved and I rely on my hard work, and being team player, and

390 that's what I love about here. There's no BS and it's straightforward – you're a hard  
391 worker and a good person – that's the culture that's here. (...) This is the only place where  
392 I've said in the past that I feel comfortable with the kind of team and the principles that I  
393 admire – that I want to be part of.

394 In summary, although the participants' stories shift as they search for their place in the  
395 sport world and the broader society, both athletes continue constructing a life story where their  
396 religion forms a ground of being shaping their values and basic attitudes towards sport life. Both  
397 athletes construct their life paths strongly around the athletic career trajectory albeit in very  
398 different institutional settings (professional vs amateur). However, both start to become distanced  
399 from religious practices and communities in the course of multiple (developmental, cultural,  
400 athletic) life transitions, developing stories of a more individualised, private religion.

#### 401 **From the present towards anticipated futures**

402 Being mature athletes approaching their final years in the peak phase of elite athletic career,  
403 both athletes are reflective of the anticipated, or at least socially expected retirement from the  
404 elite sport. In his mid-30s, Lucas is acutely aware of the deviant trajectory that his life is  
405 following and seeks to justify this:

406 My brother is married and has two children, whereas I'm single and live alone. Well, I  
407 bought my own apartment and I'm building my life that way. But I don't have a  
408 family(...) We talk about the contemporary society that is it diverse and there doesn't  
409 need to be just one way. Being aware of that helps. Also many others, like individual  
410 athletes.

411 He also mentions his parents' traditional views on life, and how “they have asked me many times  
412 when I am going to retire [from sport], start living a normal life... and so I have had to justify  
413 myself, prove that I can take care of things even if I train twice a day”. Aware of the normative

414 life scripts of adulthood and the possibility that he might have passed his athletic peak, he has  
415 explored his own motives and meaning of running. The early sporting experiences disconnected  
416 from the dominant performance narrative provide him with narrative resources to construct the  
417 joy of sport as his key life theme, and he continues to pursue his athletic life project with the  
418 entry into Veteran athletics in sight: “it is not too long before I can compete in the over 50  
419 category (laughing)”. He also says that if he finds a life partner, she needs to accept that running  
420 is important for him: “I can do it less, but to stop doing something that I’ve enjoyed to do for  
421 such a long time...” Interactions with the Veteran athletes in his club provide him with further  
422 exemplary stories of how sport can be an integral aspect of life also in the future. He views his  
423 hope for a bright future in his sport life project, possibly as a Veteran athlete, as a part of his  
424 religious worldview: “the best is still ahead, that is also a religious understanding”.

425         Meanwhile, Vincent’s life design is shaped by an anticipated disengagement from the  
426 sport-work: “I’m not going to do this for the rest of my life, so I [need to] think what’s in the rest  
427 of your life – your wife, kids, that’s who you want [to be], that takes a priority on anything else.”  
428 He doesn’t have a contract for the next season, which he sees that as a good opportunity to “take  
429 a time out” and analyse his life. He repeatedly states that his family is the priority and looks  
430 forward to being closer to them. He also has an idea for working as some kind of cultural  
431 consultant in sport, helping transnational athletes in adaptation to new teams in new cultural  
432 locations. However, religiosity is largely absent from his future perspective and he does not talk  
433 about reintegration to a religious community – perhaps because his wife doesn’t share his  
434 Catholic beliefs and practices. He talks about still believing, but:

435         As you get older (...) you start becoming your own person and you start seeing things  
436         different ways sometimes, and you’re exposed to more things. I feel like there is a God,



461 locations and traditions of specific denominations (McGrath, 2008). For example, despite  
462 visible examples of sport and religion interface such as sport chaplaincy, some Christian church  
463 leaders continue to see sport as something that potentially counters spiritual development  
464 (Parker & Watson, 2014). These findings highlight the diversity of interpretations within  
465 Christianity when it comes to the meaning and value of sport practices.

466 In terms of bonding (i.e., religious practices to connect with the transcendent), Vincent  
467 again expressed segregated views, (“don’t ever ask God to help you on the ice”) whereas  
468 Lucas’s account was more selective and ambiguous. Although a link between religious  
469 practices (going to Church and prayer) and sporting life is absent from his childhood narratives,  
470 it later emerges and marks a potential shift in his relationship with God in his adulthood. Yet, he  
471 rejects a relatively new popular discourse of distance running as spiritual activity (e.g.,  
472 Simpson, Post, Young, & Jensen, 2014), which could indicate that such discourses might not  
473 resonate so well with athletes with a more traditional religious worldview.

474 Despite the segregated and selective elements in the storytelling, the athletes also  
475 consistently constructed a story aligned with the committed type in relation to Christian values  
476 in sport. They emphasised the importance of Christian values and virtues in their lives in and  
477 outside of sport (e.g., work ethic, justice, respect, hope), clearly indicating that they thought  
478 God cared about how they conduct themselves in sport life (i.e., God separates the person from  
479 the activity). Although the athletes were aware that sometimes “the good guy” might not get  
480 rewarded for their ethical behaviour in sport, the strong dissonance between their Christian  
481 values and the moral code of sport described by Stevenson (1991) was absent from their stories.  
482 This highlights that although some athletes might think it is not appropriate to “mix God with  
483 sports”, religion could still have an influence on their sport lives that matters for their career

484 development and well-being.

485         In the journeys through multiple life transitions, the stories involved a common temporal  
486 pattern where athletes started to become distanced from communal religion. This movement  
487 was influenced by sport (i.e., making non-religious friends through sport for Lucas and  
488 prioritising hockey over churchgoing for Vincent) and also reflects the broader cultural shift  
489 where traditional church practices are losing their grip especially on the younger generations  
490 (Davie, 2007). Although the athletes expressed agency in moving towards a more  
491 individualised form of religiosity, the requirements to compete on Sundays and relocate to  
492 secure employability (for Vincent) also forced a separation from active religious practices and  
493 communities. Furthermore, narratively reframing religion as a personal and inner dimension  
494 could be a part of their cultural adaptation to the secular Nordic societies. That is, although the  
495 religious landscape in the Nordic countries has become more complex with multi-culturalism  
496 and new forms of spirituality emerging, religion has been predominantly considered a private  
497 and individual issue (Bäckström, 2014). As Saroglou (2011) observed, in highly secularised  
498 societies, religion is often thought more like an intrinsic attitude whereas extrinsic religion (of  
499 collective practices) is less relevant. Athletes' stories about individualised religion align well  
500 with the cultural context where they were embedded in and could be seen as part of the  
501 meaning reconstruction that forms a vital aspect of cultural transition (Ryba, Stambulova, &  
502 Ronkainen, 2016). While the athletes themselves maintained that their belief has been sustained  
503 with certain modifications without active religious practices, scholars have raised questions  
504 about possibilities of 'believing without belonging', arguing that "the passivity of so-called  
505 'believers' is itself a sign of religious decline" (Voas & Crockett, 2005, p. 24). This said it is  
506 evident that religion continued to influence participants' lives in the form of basic assumptions

507 about the world, personal values, and deep-held religious cultural expectations.

508 From a narrative perspective, a life story is never a pure reflection of inner life, but a  
509 relational construction shaped by the intended audience(s) and the immediate intersubjective  
510 context (McAdams, 2008; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). It is likely that the participants (especially  
511 Vincent) would have only briefly discussed religion, if at all, without the interviewer  
512 introducing the topic. Blodgett et al. (2017) suggested that the sport culture applies a “don’t  
513 ask, don’t tell” norm in relation to religion, and therefore athletes may hesitate to discuss their  
514 religion in a sports-related context. It is likely that the increasingly secularised context with the  
515 cultural norm of religion as a private issue had further prevented athletes from discussing their  
516 faith in a sport-related situation. Vincent told [2<sup>nd</sup> author, name] that no one had ever asked him  
517 this kind of questions, indicating that religion was omitted from his public life as an athlete.  
518 Our participants had grown up in very traditional Christian families and were clearly outliers to  
519 the dominant norm of secularised cultural Christianity in the Nordic context (Zuckerman,  
520 2009); thus, they were likely to be aware that certain religious expressions may not be well  
521 received by people in the national cultural contexts in which they were embedded. However,  
522 once the interviewers had shown empathetic interest in how religion manifests in their lives,  
523 athletes were willing to discuss their views and experiences.

524 As the case study has illustrated, athletes have individual and unique ways of bringing  
525 religion into their sport life, and it is important that applied practitioners are aware of this  
526 diversity. As Andersen (1993) reminded us, variance is always large within any cultural group,  
527 and we may easily become “sensitive stereotypers” rather than “sensitive” on a truly individual  
528 basis. If athletes choose to bring their religion into discussions with the applied sport  
529 psychology practitioners, it is essential that the practitioners seek to suspend their assumptions



530 about that particular religion and demonstrate positive regard and respect to their clients’  
531 worldviews (Sarkar et al., 2015). For this to take place, it is important that practitioners are self-  
532 reflective about their own attitudes towards religion and how they shape their interactions with  
533 the client. In the psychological literature, religion is sometimes considered merely as a defence  
534 mechanism (Pargament, 2011) and religion has become increasingly associated with the  
535 traditional, institutional and “bad” (Pargament, 1999), which in turn can influence the ways in  
536 which sport psychology practitioners think about religion. Furthermore, there is a need to  
537 understand the cultural contexts which will influence whether any topic becomes expressed or  
538 silenced. Although some athletes might not readily introduce religion as a topic of discussion, it  
539 does not imply that it might not be an important aspect of their lives.

540 As a limitation of the present study, the interviews were conducted with the aim of  
541 eliciting broad life stories and not specifically focused on religion. However, the fact that the  
542 participants were prepared to talk about their religious beliefs and practices indicates that they  
543 were important for them. We acknowledge that other cultural identities (of gender, ethnicity,  
544 etc.) intersect in athletes’ life narratives to shape their religious experience, but other  
545 intersecting identities were not analysed in the current study; however, it should be remembered  
546 that the results reflect the stories of two white males. Finally, our study revealed important  
547 differences to previous studies on Christian athletes’ experiences in sport (e.g., Balague, 1999;  
548 Grindstaff et al., 2010; Mosley et al., 2015), highlighting diversity within the identity ‘category’  
549 of a Christian athlete. In future work, it will be valuable to conduct research in various cultural  
550 locations and with more diverse participants to extend our understandings of the role of religion  
551 in athletes’ lives.

552

### Conclusions

553 The present study sought to explore the role of religion in Christian elite athletes' life transitions  
 554 and life journeys. In contrast to many previous findings on religious meaning-making in sport,  
 555 the athletes narratively separated religious belief from sport practice and constructed sport as a  
 556 secular life project. In the athletes' stories, however, religion's role was the most prominent as a  
 557 source of values (that also apply in sport) and basic world assumptions and that were largely  
 558 sustained through various life transitions. Through performative narrative analysis, we also  
 559 illustrated the tensions in expressing the religious dimension of the life-world in a secularised  
 560 cultural context, which has important implications for the applied practitioner working with  
 561 religious athletes. An awareness of the potential importance of the religious and/or spiritual  
 562 dimension, even if it might not be immediately expressed, is important for researchers and  
 563 practitioners when seeking to develop a truly holistic understanding of the athlete.

564

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