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**Sport, Spirituality and Religion:  
Muscular Christianity and Beyond**

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## Abstract

It has been widely argued that during the nineteenth century the English public schools and the Protestant church in Britain played a formative and innovative role in the growth of modern sport through what has been termed ‘muscular Christianity’; an ideology subsequently exported around the globe via British Imperialism. The emergence of neo-muscular Christian groups during the latter half of the twentieth century can be seen as a direct consequence of this historical legacy. Modern-day evangelical Protestant organisations such as Christians in Sport (CiS) in the UK and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) and Athletes in Action (AIA) in the US, have resurrected many of the basic theological principles used to promote sport and physical fitness in Victorian Britain. This paper examines the historical and theological development of muscular Christianity and how this has impacted the relationship between sport and religion in twenty first century Britain and North America.

## Sport, Protestantism and the English public schools

A well rehearsed argument in the literature surrounding the development of modern sport is that during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century certain sporting activities were transformed from a collection of unruly pastimes into a series of structured and codified games via the English public schools.<sup>1</sup> This transformation, it is argued, was primarily triggered by changes within the governance and curricular practices of these institutions and, in particular, through the work of Thomas Arnold, Headteacher of Rugby School between 1828-1841.<sup>2</sup>

For all the prestige that the English public schools portrayed during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century one of the characteristics that they often failed to exhibit was a sense of leadership and order.<sup>3</sup> This was something that Thomas Arnold sought to address when he arrived at Rugby in 1828. Central to Arnold’s subsequent reforms were his own religious beliefs and his desire to transform his young charges into ‘good Christian gentlemen’. A common misconception surrounding the prevalence of the games playing ethos at Rugby is that Arnold himself was the instigator of such

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<sup>1</sup> See J.A. MANGAN, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School*, London, Frank Cass, 1981; J.A. MANGAN and J. WALVIN, (Eds.) *Manliness and morality: Middle class masculinity in Britain and America*, New York, St. Martins Press, 1987; R. HOLT, *Sport and the British*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989.

<sup>2</sup> See MANGAN, *Athleticism in the Victorian*; F. NEDDAM, “Constructing masculinities under Thomas Arnold of Rugby (1828-1842): gender, educational policy and school life in early-Victorian public school”, in: *Gender and Education*, 16 (2004) 3, pp.303-326. As both of these authors have noted, opinions concerning the influence and achievements of Arnold during his time at Rugby are far from unanimous.

<sup>3</sup> MANGAN, *Athleticism in the Victorian*; NEDDAM, “Constructing masculinities”.

activities.<sup>4</sup> Yet it was his colleague the Revd. George Cotton, who is said to have overseen athletic provision at the school.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the Arnoldian regime amounted to much more than simply playing games. An education in the ‘classics’ continued to be upheld as the guardian of moral character, and the passing of responsibility to older pupils (*prefects*) as the gateway to discipline, respect and ‘Christian manliness’.<sup>6</sup> Word of Arnold’s reforms quickly spread, and Headteachers of other schools followed suit, at least partly guided by parental demand for sporting practice.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, news of Arnold’s work traveled fast both inside and outside of the public school system. One reason for this was the writings of two well known authors of the time, Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes.

### **Sport and Victorian Values**

During the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century Charles Kingsley (clergyman, academic, novelist and poet), and his friend and associate, Thomas Hughes (lawyer, politician and novelist), became key players in the relationship between sport and religion. Specific aspects of their work stand out as particularly influential in this respect, perhaps most notably Hughes’s *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* (1857) the story of a boy (Tom Brown) whose character is shaped during his days at Rugby school.<sup>8</sup> Hughes had been a pupil of Arnold at Rugby between 1834-1841, but the book is said to have been based on the life of his brother, George Hughes. Along with the work of Kingsley, the sense of high moral value and masculine physical endeavour which Hughes’s novel portrayed collectively formed the basis of what came to be known as ‘muscular Christianity’; a

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<sup>4</sup> See M. TOZER “Charles Kingsley and the ‘muscular Christian’ ideal of manliness”, in: *Physical Education Review*, 8 (1985), pp. 35-50; MANGAN, *Athleticism in the Victorian*.

<sup>5</sup> See P. McINTOSH, *Fair Play: Ethics in Sport and Education*, London, Heinemann, 1979; N.J.WATSON, S. WEIR and S. FRIEND, “The Development of Muscular Christianity in Victorian Britain and Beyond”, in: *Journal of Religion and Society*, 7 (2005) 1, pp.1-25; J.R.S. HONEY, *Tom Brown’s Universe: The development of the English public school in the nineteenth century*, London, Millington, 1978. According to Honey, Cotton’s promotion of organised games as part of the curriculum at Rugby came in response to demands from the boys themselves for such activities to take place.

<sup>6</sup> MANGAN, *Athleticism in the Victorian*; J. HARGREAVES, *Sport, Power and Culture*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1986; NEDDAM, “Constructing masculinities”.

<sup>7</sup> MANGAN, *Athleticism in the Victorian*.

<sup>8</sup> T. HUGHES, *Tom Brown’s School Days*, London, Macmillan, 1857/1995.

term encapsulating spiritual, moral and physical purity alongside notions of Christian manliness.<sup>9</sup>.

In reality muscular Christianity had at its roots in a whole range of ethical and moral concerns which were prevalent in Britain in the mid-1880s: the protection of the weak, the plight of the poor, and the promotion of moral virtue. The incorporation of these (and other) concerns into a framework of physical endeavour and spiritual cleanliness resulted in the establishment of a series of core values which, in time, came to underpin the relationship between sport and religion: fair play, respect (both for oneself and others), strength (physical and emotional), perseverance, deference, subordination, obedience, discipline, loyalty, co-operation, self control, self sacrifice, endurance. Especially significant here was a fervent Christianity and stoic masculinity which collectively engendered the formation of personal character and a respect for the physical body. Revered too were virtues such as courage, temperance and *esprit de corps*, the ‘holy trinity’ of moral stature, most notably expressed by Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the modern Olympic Games, who expressed a familiarity with Thomas Hughes’ novels

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<sup>9</sup> Kingsley did not approve of the term ‘muscular Christianity. Indeed, though commonly attributed to him the phrase did, in fact, emanate from a review of his book *Two Years Ago* which appeared in the *Saturday Review* in 1857, see B. SIMON, and I. BRADLEY (Eds.), *The Victorian Public School: Studies in the development of an educational institution*, Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1975. Hughes, however, was more agreeable to the term and used it in the less successful sequel to his first novel which was entitled, *Tom Brown at Oxford*, see T. HUGHES, *Tom Brown at Oxford*, London, Macmillan, 1861/1995. The tenets of muscular Christianity should not solely be associated with Protestantism. On the contrary, a range of faiths and denominations have since allied themselves to such values and ideals. See for example, A. HUGHES, “Muscular Judaism and the Jewish Rugby League Competition in Sydney, 1924 to 1927”, in: *Sporting Traditions: Journal of the Australian Society for Sport History*, 13 (1996) 1, pp.61-80; T.J.L CHANDLER, “Manly Catholicism: Making men in Catholic public schools, 1954-80”, in: T MAGDALINSKI and T.J.L. CHANDLER (Eds.), *With God on Their Side: Sport in the Service of Religion*, London: Routledge, 2002, pp. 99-119; J.S. GUROCK, *Judaism's Encounter with American Sports*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2005; I. ABE, “Muscular Christianity in Japan: The Growth of a Hybrid”, in: *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 23 (2006) 5, pp.714–738; J.S. ALTER, “Indian Clubs and Colonialism: Hindu masculinity and muscular Christianity,” in: *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 46 (2004) 3, pp.497-534. J.S. ALTER, “Yoga at the *Fin de Siecle*: Muscular Christianity with a ‘Hindu’ Twist”, in: *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 23 (2006) 5, pp.759–776; W.J. BAKER, “Athletes for Allah”, in: W J BAKER, *Playing with God: Religion and Modern Sport*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2007, pp. 218-239; T. PRESSNER, *Muscular Judaism: the Jewish body and the politics of regeneration*, London, Routledge, 2007; N.J. WATSON, “Muscular Christianity in the modern age: ‘Winning for Christ’ or ‘playing for glory’?”, in: J. PARRY, S. ROBINSON, N.J. WATSON and M. NESTI, (Eds.) *Sport and Spirituality: An introduction*, London, Routledge, 2007, pp. 80-93; R. KIMBALL, “Muscular Mormonism”, in: *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 25 (2008) 5, pp.549-578; M. FREEMAN, “Muscular Quakerism? The Society of Friends and Youth Movements in Britain c.1900-1950”.

and, after visiting Rugby in 1883, was said to be heavily influenced by the work of Arnold.<sup>10</sup>

Likewise, Kingsley and Hughes were not the first to infer the moral value (or manly qualities) of sporting pursuit. Such sentiments are certainly evident within the work of previous writers such as J-J Rousseau, George Lawrence and William Clarke.<sup>11</sup> Specific to the work of Kingsley and Hughes was a belief in the power of the culture of games to combat the perceived effeminacy of society and of the public schools.<sup>12</sup> More importantly, there was a growing concern in the mid-1880s that church congregations, (and Christianity *per se*), were succumbing to a wave of effeminacy. Some wanted Protestantism to become more intimately re-connected to masculine values. Sporting manliness was seen as the antidote to this debilitating malaise and muscular Christianity as a response to the puritanical religiosity of the time and the somewhat static nature of the church with regards to broader social issues. Be it attributable to Kingsley and Hughes or not, the upshot of the wider dissemination of the muscular Christian ideology was that the Protestant elite began to advocate the use of sports to promote the relationship between the development of mind, body and spirit. In turn, a series of broader social conditions and circumstances can also be seen to have nurtured its emergence, one of which was the Victorian pre-occupation with sanitation and health, a mind-set exacerbated by the vagaries of an increasingly industrialised working class.

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<sup>10</sup> See J.A. LUCAS, "Baron de Coubertin and Thomas Arnold", in: *Bulletin du Comité International Olympique*, No.98-99, May-August, 1967, pp.58-60. Available at: <http://www.la84foundation.org/OlympicInformationCenter/OlympicReview/1967/BDCE98/BDCE98e.pdf>. See also: [http://multimedia.olympic.org/pdf/en\\_report\\_1265.pdf](http://multimedia.olympic.org/pdf/en_report_1265.pdf). The manifestation of these ideals within the context of the Olympic Games is, of course, most notably portrayed in the film *Chariots of Fire*, which tells the story of the athlete Eric Liddell.

<sup>11</sup> See HARGREAVES, *Sport, Power and Culture*; WATSON et al., *The Development of Muscular Christianity*.

<sup>12</sup> See D. NEWSOME, *Godliness and Good Learning: Four Studies on a Victorian Ideal*. London: Cassell, 1961; B. DOBBS, *Edwardians at Play: 1890-1914*. London: Pelham, 1973; J.A. MANGAN and J. WALVIN, *Manliness and Morality*; T. CROSSETT, "Masculinity, Sexuality and the Development of Early Modern Sport", in: M.A. MESSNER and D.F. SABO (Eds.) *Sport, Men and the Gender Order*, Champaign, IL., Human Kinetics Press, 1990, pp.45-54; D. WHITSON, "Sport in the Social Construction of Masculinity", in: M.A. MESSNER and D.F. SABO (Eds.) *Sport, Men and the Gender Order*, Champaign, IL., Human Kinetics Press, 1990, pp.19-30; W.J. BAKER, "Questioning Tom Brown: Sport and the Character Game", in: J. SQUIRES (Ed.) *A Fair go for All? Current Issues in Australian Sport Ethics*, Sydney, New College Institute for Values Research, 2000, pp.7-18; C. PUTNEY, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and sports in Protestant America 1880-1920*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2001. For a broader analysis of the perceived effeminacy of US and UK society at various points in history, see M.S. KIMMEL (Ed.), *Changing men: new directions in research on men and masculinity*, London, Sage, 1987.

## **Sport and the Church: A new era?**

Given the social tensions surrounding sport and other popular cultural pastimes in Victorian Britain, how then, we might ask, was the relationship between the Protestant church and sport configured? In line with the work of other historians, McLeod has noted that from the 1850s onwards, sport grew in popularity in Britain (both at a participatory and at a -spectatorship level) and that as a consequence the church came to recognize more readily the value of sport both in terms of its social status and its religious significance.<sup>13</sup> It is clear, for example, that from the mid nineteenth century churches actively began to explore connections with sport. From this time on the Anglican Church appears to have encouraged sporting links primarily out of a desire to eradicate the strong sense of ‘puritanism’ permeating its orbits and the resultant alienation of ‘ordinary folks’. The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed a spectacular explosion of sport in Britain. By 1900 half a million or more played regularly in leagues.<sup>14</sup> In Birmingham, for example, the number of football clubs had grown from one in 1874 to 155 in 1880.<sup>15</sup> Church sports teams began to spring up all over the country, although they were much more common among liberal than among evangelical churches.<sup>16</sup> It has been estimated that in Birmingham in the years 1871-1880 20% of the total number of cricket clubs and just under 25 % of the association football clubs had connections with religious organizations.<sup>17</sup> Lupson has highlighted in detail the involvement of church and chapel during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century in the formation of football teams which would ultimately go on to develop into Football League clubs.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, the work of Cox and Williams has charted the connections between the church and cricket in various geographical regions and localities of Britain.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See McLEOD, “Thews and Sinews”; H. McLEOD, ‘Sport and the English Sunday School, 1869-1939’, in S. ORCHARD and J.H.Y. BRIGGS (Eds.), *The Sunday School Movement: Studies in the growth and decline of Sunday Schools*, (Milton Keynes, Paternoster, 2007), pp. 109-123.

<sup>14</sup> HOLT, *Sport and the British*.

<sup>15</sup> D. BIRLEY, *Sport and the Making of Britain*, (Manchester University Press, 1993).

<sup>16</sup> P. SCOTT, “Cricket and the religious world of the Victorian Period, in: *The Church Quarterly*, 3 (1970), pp.134-144.

<sup>17</sup> D.D. MOLYNEUX, *The development of physical recreation in the Birmingham district from 1871 to 1892*, MA Thesis, University of Birmingham, UK, 1957; T. Mason, *Association Football and English Society 1863-1915*.

<sup>18</sup> LUPSON, *Thank God for Football!*

<sup>19</sup> See J. COX, *English Churches in a Secular Society: Lambeth 1870-1930*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1982); J. WILLIAMS, “Recreational cricket in the Bolton Area between the Wars”, in: R. HOLT (Ed.) *Sport and the Working Class in Modern Britain*, (Manchester, Manchester

The inclusion of sport as a part of church life often came about as a consequence of the introduction of a series of broader activities into congregational leisure time. These comprised such things as afternoon teas, picnics, and games and amusement events. Such innovation was not without its doubters. Indeed, there were still criticisms from some quarters regarding the vagaries of sport, primarily that amusement should not become the main business of the church and that all the energy of God's people should not be spent trying to retain the interest of the young. But church provision in this area was more complex than simply the setting up of football teams or the organisation of leisure pursuits. Evident also was the formal establishment of libraries, chess, billiard, tennis and cycling clubs and, specifically for females, rounders, table tennis and hockey teams and gymnasia and callisthenics.<sup>20</sup>

All of this culminated in the development of a sophisticated network of activities the underpinning principles for which appear common to both Anglican and Nonconformist churches. For McLeod, the developing relationship between sport and the church in the mid-late 19<sup>th</sup> century can be summarised via a chronological framework comprising five broad categories.<sup>21</sup> First, the spontaneous emergence of sports activities along the lines of 'fellowship and fun'. Second, the provision of sporting clubs and facilities for the purposes of maintaining the interest of teenagers (mainly boys) who had attended Sunday School but who were in danger of 'falling away' from the faith. Third, the provision of other kinds of leisure and sporting facilities in order to attract people from outside of the church. Fourthly, the promotion of sport by clergy and church leaders who advocated that it should be viewed as a legitimate part of a broader holistic (spiritual) lifestyle and as a form of personal development. And fifth, that by the 1920s and 30s sport had become so well established as a part of chapel and church it had, quite simply, become an acceptable part of institutional life.

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University Press, 1990), pp.101-120; J. WILLIAMS, "Churches, Sport and Identities in the North, 1900-1939", in: J HILL and J. WILLIAMS (Eds.) *Sport and Identity in the North of England*, (Keele, Keele University Press, 1996), pp.113-136; D.A. REID, *Labour, leisure and Politics in Birmingham, c.1800-1875*, PhD Thesis, University of Birmingham, UK, 1985.

<sup>20</sup> Cycling, in particular, received a mixed reception during this period, being advocated by some within the church and denigrated by others. For further detail see: N. WIGGLESWORTH, *The Evolution of English Sport*, (London: Frank Cass, 1996); J. LOWERSON, "Sport and the Victorian Sunday: The beginnings of Middle-class apostasy", in: *British Journal of Sports History*, 1(2) (1984).

<sup>21</sup> McLEOD, "Thews and Sinews".



Notwithstanding the increased level of tolerance demonstrated by liberal in comparison to evangelical churches, what McLeod neatly establishes is that from 1850 onwards Protestantism in Britain had, at the very least, begun to accept sport as a legitimate and holistic lifestyle pursuit. To this end, it can be argued that sport added to what some have observed to be a broader secularization of the church around this time. Needless to say, there were on-going debates and tensions about the role of sporting activity in church life, these included anxieties over: (i) the irrelevance of sport to spiritual development and the distractive potential that it held; (ii) the way in which the provision of ‘amusement’ by the church (however wholesome) might do little to quell the public’s appetite for such things and how these activities might undermine the main purpose and witness of church life; (iii) the kinds of moral values that sport promoted and whether these were commensurate with scripture; and (iv) the allocation of time to sport and the dissolution of strict sabbatarianism. Church leaders addressed these tensions in various ways but what seems certain is that, irrespective of the underlying motive for the increased acquaintance of the church and sport, wider concerns over the health of the nation served to shore up the general acceptance of sport as a legitimate aspect of church life.

### **The Legacy of Muscular Christianity in the Modern World**

Few would argue with the assertion that, as a popular cultural activity, sport has changed markedly since its early configurations in Victorian Britain. Modern day sport is a worldwide phenomenon and one which features large in the new global political economy. Technological advancements in recent years have spawned a growth and intensification of media resources which, in turn, has led to the wider popularisation of sport as a cultural spectacle.<sup>22</sup> Today sports coverage is commonplace amidst the offerings of numerous television and communication networks as the sport-media relationship becomes ever more intimate and lucrative. Such advancements necessarily bring with them a level of commercialisation which has the potential to promote a series of highly negative consequences; corruption,

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<sup>22</sup> BOYLE, R. and HAYNES, R., *Power Play: Sport, the Media and Popular Culture*, London, Longman, 1999; ROWE, D., *Sport, Culture and the Media*, Buckingham, Open University Press, 2003.

greed, selfishness, violence. Yet, amidst all of this, sport maintains a series of what might be termed socially cohesive properties being utilised widely as a tool of engagement for those who find themselves on the margins of society and by governments eager to promote notions of social inclusion.<sup>23</sup> While addressing the participants of the World Swimming Championships in Rome in August 2009, Pope Benedict XVI emphasised the positive virtues and values of sport which such events may bring:

With your competitions you offer the world a fascinating spectacle of discipline and humanity, of artistic beauty and tenacious determination. You show what goals the vitality of youth can achieve when young people submit to the effort of a demanding training and are willing to accept numerous sacrifices and deprivations. All this is also an important lesson for life for your peers ... Sport practiced with enthusiasm and an acute ethical sense ... become a training ground for healthy competition and physical improvement, a school of formation in the human and spiritual values, a privileged means for personal growth and contact with society.<sup>24</sup>

Just prior to the 2004 Olympics in Athens, the Vatican recognized the importance of promoting ethics in sport and formed an office for “Church and Sport” within the Pontifical Council for the Laity. The remit of the Office includes: the fostering of pastoral work in and through sport, the propagation of teaching and research on sport (especially its ethical nature), the encouragement of initiatives to evangelize the world of sport, and the promotion of “a culture of sport” that is “an instrument of peace and brotherhood among peoples”.<sup>25</sup>

Recognising the potential of sport as a powerful socialising agent, during the second half of the twentieth century Protestant evangelical groups demonstrated an eagerness to replicate the approach of the early muscular Christians with a series of ‘sports ministry’ organisations being founded on both sides of the Atlantic. In the US, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA), and Athletes in Action (AIA) are two of best known and are active in nearly all intercollegiate athletic programmes as well as in sending ‘sports ministers’ to countries such as Africa, Latin America and south-east

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<sup>23</sup> COLLINS, M.F., *Examining Sport Development*, London, Routledge, 2010.

<sup>24</sup> BENEDICT XVI, Speech to the participants of the World Swimming Championships, *L'Osservatore Romano*, No.31, 5<sup>th</sup> August 2009, p.12.

<sup>25</sup> C. GLATZ, “Sports Office Speeds Out of the Blocks.” in *The Catholic Times*, 15<sup>th</sup> August, p.12.

Asia to deliver the gospel message while providing fun and healthy activities (Ladd and Mathisen, 1999). In the UK, the Protestant evangelical organization Christians in Sport (CIS) has developed a similar profile preparing young people for evangelism in and through the world of sport.

The sport-religion interface has also developed at an altogether more academic level on both sides of the Atlantic. For example, the University of Notre Dame and Neumann College have formed a sports ministry partnership with the aim of promoting the spiritual and ethical dimensions of faith-based sport.<sup>26</sup> A key part of this venture has been the establishment of the Centre for Sport, Spirituality and Character Development at Neumann College and the Mendelson Centre for Sports, Character and Culture at Notre Dame. The UK has also witnessed the establishment of university-based teaching and research centers which have as their focus the relationship between sport, spirituality and religion. Leading the way in this respect have been The Centre for the Study of Sport and Spirituality at York St. John University and, more recently, The Centre for Sport, Spirituality and Religion at the University of Gloucestershire, the latter of which offers professionally-based postgraduate qualifications for sports ministers and sports chaplains.<sup>27</sup>

These developments contrast markedly with the highly publicised and often tarnished complexion of modern-day professional sports where allegations of rule-breaking and performance enhancing drug use, and instances of personal degradation and violence are commonplace.<sup>28</sup> In turn, this decline in ethical and moral standards within professional sport has somewhat predictably been absorbed into the Olympics. Alongside others, Volkwein attributes this primarily to the professionalization and commercialization of top-level sport which has distorted the notion of fair play and the true spirit advocated by Pierre de Coubertin at the end of the nineteenth century. The Olympic Charter includes references to freedom of religious worship, which has

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<sup>26</sup> For further details see: <http://www.neumann.edu/mission/ISSCD/default.asp>

<sup>27</sup> For further details see: <http://www.glos.ac.uk/research/shsc/cssr/Pages/default.aspx>

<sup>28</sup> See KRATTENMAKER, T. *Onward Christian Athletes: Turning ballparks into pulpits and players into preachers*, New York, Rowman and Littlefield, 2010; HOFFMAN, S.J. *Good Game: Christianity and the Culture of Sports*, Baylor, TX, Baylor University Press, 2010.

led evangelical sports organizations to recognize the opportunity for witness and service at major sporting events in the form of sports chaplaincy.<sup>29</sup>

Explicit Christian ministry of this nature began at major sporting events at the 1972 Munich Olympics, with chaplains providing an ‘unofficial’ service to athletes but took on a more formalised structure in 1988, at the summer Olympics in Seoul and the Winter Olympics in Calgary, Canada. The International Bible Society produced an evangelistic booklet in the form of a souvenir program for the 1988 games, which proved to be a significant development in the history of sports ministry. From this, the use of evangelical literature was a key strategy at the 2000 Sydney Olympics. Christian publishers also created many other resources for the 2000 games, such as CDs, websites, and Sports New Testaments. It is estimated that more than one million Christian sports resources were distributed during the period leading up to the Sydney games with over 200,000 *Sports New Testaments* being sold. Christian outreach agencies also played a major role with approximately 45 denominations and para-Church ministry groups and 700 Churches involved in service and witness across Australia. It has been estimated that sports ministry outreach, in one form or another, took place in over 100 countries during the period of the 2004 Athens Olympics. In Athens, the Church of England’s Greater Athens Chaplaincy and the local Greek Evangelical Church corroborated to form a group of 40 Protestant Chaplains to minister to Olympic athletes during the games in August and the Paralympics in September. In addition, many evangelical sports organizations sent representatives to Athens for the 2004 Olympics. It could be argued that such events have resulted in the (re)emergence of ‘sports ministry’ as a worldwide phenomenon.

### **Concluding remarks**

Throughout the preceding discussion our intention has been to present an overview of the way in which the relationship between sport and religion has developed over the past 150 years.<sup>30</sup> In so doing, we have rehearsed the familiar story of how, through the work of Thomas Arnold at Rugby school and via the influence of writers such as

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<sup>29</sup> S. WEIR, *The Ultimate Prize: Great Christian Olympians*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2004.

<sup>30</sup> For critique and comparison of the varying approaches to sport by the Protestant and the Roman Catholic church, see: S.J. HOFFMAN, *Sport and Religion*, LADD and MATHESON, *Muscular Christianity*, and N.J. WATSON. “Muscular Christianity in the modern age: ‘winning for Christ’ or ‘playing for glory’?”, in J. PARRY, S. ROBINSON, N.J. WATSON and M. NESTI, *Sport and Spirituality: An introduction*, London, Routledge, 2007, pp. 80-93.

Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes, Victorian Britain played host to the emergence of the sport-religion relationship, and, as a consequence, longstanding religious values began to permeate and underpin sporting endeavour. We have subsequently highlighted how, over time, the ideological sporting values formulated during this period have seen something of a resurgence in recent years. Here, in closing, we offer our thoughts on the further development of this relationship and its potential in terms of broader notions of sports ministry, outreach, and mission.

In his book *Christianity's Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution from the Sixteenth to the Twenty-First Century*, Alistair McGrath suggests that because Protestant attitudes and opinions towards sport have traditionally demonstrated a tendency to fluctuate over time in accordance with prevailing theological and cultural assumptions, it is somewhat unwise to try to predict how such things might develop in future years.<sup>31</sup> Given McGrath's words of caution, how, we might ask, should we begin to think about future work in this area? For sure, there is evidence to suggest that, in the UK at least, the vestiges of evangelical negativism towards sport remains. It is true, for example, that some churches and church leaders still see sport as something which detracts from (or counters) spiritual growth and maturity. On the other hand, sport, as a specific area of ministry, has witnessed something of a resurgence in recent years and is now an established field of outreach both within church and para-church organisations and within secular settings. Likewise, those involved in sports ministry continue to forge forward in relation to establishing a presence in elite sport and within the context of mega-events; this is presently evidenced in and through the operationalisation of the 'More than Gold' strategy; the interdenominational organisation coordinating the Christian community's involvement with the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games in London.<sup>32</sup>

On a broader scale modern-day sports ministry also has a host of practical matters with which to deal. The culture of 21<sup>st</sup> century secular sport is such that moral and ethical issues feature large amidst the day-to-day processes of participation,

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<sup>31</sup> See A.E. McGRATH, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution from the Sixteenth to the Twenty-First Century*, London, Harper Collins, 2007.

<sup>32</sup> See: <http://www.morethangold.org.uk/>. For more information on the network of sports ministry organisations within the UK see: <http://www.uksportsministries.org/>. For more on UK sports chaplaincy see: <http://www.scorechaplaincy.org.uk/CMSPro/60/index.php>

spectatorship and media commentary, all of which have the potential to manifest themselves, to some degree or another, within the context of church-based sports programmes. Likewise, Sunday church attendance nowadays often competes for the attentions of those wishing to play sport in secular circles. Nevertheless, the popularity of sport (especially as an aspect of youth culture) continues to grow and in this sense one of the greatest challenges facing sports ministry workers is not simply to provide the moral and ethical input that sport so clearly needs, but also to provide a quality of service (resources, facilities, coaching, organisation) which competes with and surpasses all that the secular sporting world can offer.