

The Religion of Sports

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First, let me be clear: This is NOT a scholarly article or academic treatise on the subject of the interrelationship between sports and religion. Millions of trees have been sacrificed and many dissertations have been defended in that cause.

My hope for today is to make room for us to expand our understanding of human nature, worship, ritual, collective experience, and transcendence. I think that's quite enough for one Sunday, don't you?

"Is a sports event religious?" our professor asked.

I was in a seminar class of maybe 10 students, in the fall term of 2011, early in October.

The professor, Bishop John Selders, was a native of St. Louis, Missouri.

We were in a classroom at Andover Newton Theological School, in Newton Centre, Massachusetts, a mere handful of stops on the MTA's Green Line from Fenway Park. As the American League and National League Championships wrapped up, it became clear that the Boston Red Sox would play the St. Louis Cardinals in the World Series at the end of the month.

Bishop Selders' question was neither idle nor benign.

Having lived in both places, I can attest that baseball fandom does indeed take on a religious fervor that overwhelms huge metropolitan areas with excited fans.

Our discussion was lively and divided along predictable lines. Students from more orthodox branches of Christianity argued that such a thing was akin to blasphemy, while the Unitarian Universalists and Congregationalists had a more expansive concept of what worship might look like.

As seminarians, ministers are taught what a standard sort of worship service ought to look like. There are certain elements that are strung together in a way that creates an arc of attention and tension, ideally ending with some sort of resolution. The shape of these services can vary widely according to the denomination, but the standard North American Protestant service looks like what we called a "hymn sandwich."

When the service begins, there is music, then a welcome and some kind of ritual marking the beginning of the holy space. Then there are different bits of words, music, and ritual to fill the allotted time, wrapped up at the end by a final ritual that mirrors the one that happened at the beginning. Then there is usually a snack.

People arrive for the service having prepared. They sometimes wear special clothes for the occasion. They have traveled from various distances and directions to attend the service, which is a commitment. They might bring things that are important to them: some churches encourage members to bring their own bible to worship, for instance. They gather and greet one another. They meet new people, perhaps, exchange pleasantries, offer welcome to newcomers. Some places have music playing before the service as people gather. Eventually, they settle into their places and focus their attention to the front of the room, or wherever the beginning action of the service happens.

On the best Sundays, the music and ritual and words work together to build an arc around a theme or lesson. There is a common goal, people are leaning in the same direction, yearning, seeking with purpose. The music and words and ritual are a mixture of things done by leaders or by the people congregated for the service. Hymns are sung together, and instrumental pieces or anthems are for listening. Prayers are for saying together sometimes, and sometimes led by the minister or a lay leader. When we meet in person, there is opportunity for people to stand and sit and sometimes walk around a little bit in the course of the service. Many services include the ancient elements of air, water, earth and fire to offer different ways for people to connect to the experience.

The theme of the service can vary but generally focuses on achieving what is GOOD, while avoiding, or defeating what is BAD. There might be talk about how success on the path of GOOD will lead to more GOOD; and surrender to what is BAD will lead to further unpleasantness and BAD things. Good vs. evil is the general stock in trade for churches, after all.

When the magic happens exactly right and all those things work together, and the sermon is smart and inspirational and just the right amount of challenging, the congregation is lifted emotionally, or spiritually, arriving at some kind of epiphany: some truth, or realization, some bit of learning that changes how they think and act going forward. They leave humming the final hymn and thinking or talking about what they learned. Sometimes, they even change how they act going forward, deepening their commitment to their values through their behavior, and understanding that their daily lives are indeed a spiritual practice of their values. Sometimes they even find themselves tired when it's over, physically exhausted by the mental, emotional, and spiritual experience they've just had.

Those are the very, VERY best Sundays for a minister.

Now, I'd like to describe another kind of experience.

People arrive at a stadium ahead of a sporting event. They travel from all directions and from various distances to attend. Some arrive early and provide a kind of informal welcome party of tailgaters. They wear special clothes for the event, and sometimes bring important talismans with them: a lucky hat, a giant foam hand to wave, a baseball glove to catch a foul ball.

They greet one another with joy and anticipation, they go inside the stadium and find their seats, and proceed to greet their neighbors. Where are you from? Been to a game here before? Been a fan since when? Wow! They admire one another's special clothes and talismans. If their special clothes are of different colors, there might be some friendly teasing or joking back and forth about the superiority of one color jersey over the other color. There is music playing on the sound system, and occasionally announcements to remind people of where the bathrooms are and maybe some upcoming events.

The teams assemble, in their uniforms, relatively scrubbed and shiny. They line up and everyone stands for the national anthem. In baseball, a dignitary may throw out the ceremonial first pitch. In football, someone flips a coin to see which side gets the ball first. And the game begins.

There are rules governing the play, and the people in the stands cheer for the team with players who wear the same color jerseys that they wear. Those are the GOOD players. They boo the team with the other colors. Those are the BAD ones. Usually, the play starts out at a slow pace, with tempo and tension increasing over the course of the game. There are opportunities for people to sing along with the music and other times they just listen. There is often some sort of intermission period somewhere in the game – halftime, or a seventh inning stretch, for example.

Through it all, people are breathing in and out as one, holding their breath as the ball soars through the air, cheering madly when it is caught (or not, as the case may be.) There is tension as the good team and bad team vie for dominance on the field.

The tension continues until the game reaches its conclusion, with one color jersey declared the winner over the others. People gather their things, perhaps hit the bathrooms, and head for the exits. If the game has been exceptionally exciting, they might be chattering about players or plays that were pivotal or glorious. Their faces are flushed and excited. They're happy and laughing and filled with memories of the event. They might even be singing the home team's fight song.

Free of the stadium and crowds, they might find themselves to be tired, exhausted from the emotional experience they have just come from.

You tell me: is sports religion?

Humans have a deep need to see the battle of good vs. evil played out.

We particularly enjoy a story where the undervalued but virtuous hero manages to vanquish the powerful figurehead of evil. We need that story of a hero so that we can live vicariously through them while living in a world where we feel vulnerable. The story of David vs. Goliath lasts because it appeals to our inner selves who feel small and outnumbered. The story of a gladiator who defeats the worst the emperor can throw at him holds a kind of universal appeal.

We put ourselves in the place of our champions, watching in glorious slow-motion replay the spectacular feats of athletic accomplishment. They jump so high, run so fast, make leaps and landings that would cripple a typical human.

We imagine what it must be like to leap up and catch a ball, one-handed, seeming to bend the laws of physics and time and space, to bring it under control and save the play, or perhaps the entire championship game.

Oh, to be that kind of hero!

Only our bodies creak as badly as the furniture when we get up to retrieve more guacamole from the fridge during a time-out. We are not going to be that kind of athletic hero, so we instead indulge ourselves with queso dip and the fantasy of impossible athletic prowess.

The Super Bowl, the annual championship game of the National Football League is next Sunday.

For some, it will be a near-religious experience: a conflict between good and evil, a battle of champions sent out to the field of battle to represent that age-old struggle.

If you do not find a spiritual experience in that event, that's fine. Not everyone needs to watch gladiatorial combat to cheer for a champion. Champions are everywhere, of course. We find them in characters like Peace Pilgrim, and Dr. King, and Bishop William

Barber, and Congresswomen Maxine Waters, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and Cori Bush.

Religion, like spirituality, can be found where we seek it.

If you find spiritual truth upon the water, then that is true for you.

If you find spiritual truth growing things in the rich soil, then that is truth for you.

If you find truth in the stark beauty of science and reason, then that is truth for you.

If you find deep connection to peace through art, then that is truth for you.

In the years since the middle of the 20th century, people are finding their spiritual truth in places other than the traditional, orthodox religious institutions of their parents. Some find transcendence in nature, others find it in science or the cosmos, and some find that experience in sports, either as athletes or as observers.

We all need champions.

We all need truth.

Sports can be a great metaphor, an amusing illustration of a point, but do not be distracted by the illustration and miss the greater lesson that religion, like spiritual truth, and understanding, and, yes, even champions, can be found where we seek them.

May the seeking ever be our practice and our prayer.

Amen.