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God in My Sporting: A Justification for Christian Experience in Sport

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Abstract

Examining the intersection between sport and religious faith can be challenging for kinesiology professionals. Many in academics disregard religious statements and experience as meaningless, unscientific, and even dangerous. Others recognize religious experiences as valid forms of knowledge and opportunities to encounter the sacred. Each of these groups has different explanations of religious experience and the areas of life in which such experience can occur. It is the purpose of this paper to examine the legitimacy of and potential for religious experience in general, as well as Christian religious experience in sport and physical activity. After reviewing previous sport and other literature examining connections between sport and religion, this paper outlines historical and recent challenges to religious knowledge and experience as epistemologically meaningful. A contemporary argument for religious experience as warranted and meaningful is provided, and the final section introduces a Christian understanding of religious experience within physical activity and sport. Infusing physical activity with relevance and meaning derived from religious experience will help in achieving lofty outcomes such as lifelong fitness participation and adherence to exercise programs. Incorporating such a view of sport and physical activity can help make our subject matter relevant to people in a way that transcends content knowledge. One challenge to Christian kinesiology professionals is in presenting these religious opportunities in ways that are inclusive and supportive of other religious faiths.

Introduction

Some view religion as a social construct that functions to organize and support society. For others, religion is the binding reality of life experiences. Others, such as the self-described “New Atheists,” discount religion altogether as a collection of meaningless and even dangerous phenomena (Dawkins, 2006; Dennett, 2007; Harris, 2005; Hitchens, 2007). Each of these groups has different explanations of religious experience and the areas of life in which such experience can occur. It is the purpose of this paper to examine the legitimacy of and potential for religious experience in general, and in sport and physical activity. Physical activity and sport are proposed as valid avenues for religious experience and Christian worship.

Recent and diverse scholars have revived the feasibility of a scientific approach to the study of religion (Dennett, 2007; Wuthnow, 2003). Wuthnow cites William James’ comment that “a critical Science of Religions might eventually command as general a public adherence as is commanded by a physical science” (p. B10). James thought that science could help “capture the depth, motion, and vitality of religion” that philosophy seemed unable to harness. Hindsight reveals James to be among the long list of “progressives” who subscribed to an overly optimistic view of science as able to eventually uncover answers to all physical and metaphysical questions. The emergence of the social sciences came in response to what Wuthnow calls “the inevitability of interpretation and perspective” (B10). In light of the limitations of these “hard sciences” in uncovering all truth that is work knowing, Wuthnow suggests that a modern scientific approach to studying religion requires a broad interpretation of science that includes the social sciences, as well as methodologies other than merely statistical (B10). Such an interpretation will help us explore not only the “depth...and vitality of religion,” it may also lead to practical application

within sport and kinesiology in important areas like exercise adherence and relevance to students and practitioners.

Researchers within sport studies have begun to embrace this scientific, or theoretical, study of religion. Twietmeyer (2008) gives a Christian theological defense for a high view of the body and physical activity. Some have addressed the effects of religion, as well as specific religious belief such as Islam and Judaism, on physical activity participation and adherence (Kahan, 2003, 2002). Hoffman (2010) examines the specific impact of the American sports culture on evangelical Christians. The purpose of this paper is to provide a philosophical justification, distinct from an empirical or “hard science” approach, for religious experience as valid in general and as it relates to physical activity. Examples are given of how physical activity can provide Christian religious experiences in the form of knowledge of God and worship.

Sport as Religion

[Sports] belong to the realm of the beautiful and play to the world of nature, but neither to the holy (Higgs, as quoted in Hoffman, 1992, p. 8).

Setting out to establish a relationship between religion and sport seems incongruous. Hoffman (1992) contrasts the two, “religion is serious and solemn and concerns things eternal. By contrast, sport is frivolous, lighthearted, and ephemeral” (p. vii). The idea that sport qualifies as a modern religion is bordering on ludicrous, if not sacrilegious; however, this equating of sport with religion depends on the definition of religion that one holds.

Tillich (1948) defined religion as “the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of meaning and of our life” (p. 6). This expansive definition intimates religion as that which a person considers to be of ultimate reality and value. Without precisely defining this concern, it is easy to see how almost any human endeavor, sport included, might assume religious significance for a person. One can agree with Slusher (1967) that, “sport appears to be an answer to the discontentment that man feels. Life is not all it should be. There is a great void...[to] fill. Some turn to religion to take care of this need...others turn to sport to provide that something extra in life” (p. 10). Many in modern society have turned to sport, especially the commercialized and professional form, as a religious practice that can fill the void once filled by traditional religion. One need only look at the filled football stadiums and high television ratings across the country on Sunday afternoons as proof of this religious substitution.

Social scientists define religion according to its societal functions. Durkheim (1915) argued that society shares a set of beliefs, often celebrated in sacred rituals, in order to provide social cohesion to the group. These sacred beliefs and rituals are themselves symbols of society; thus, society itself becomes the object of worship. Given the intensity of emotion that exists in a sporting community around play-off time, it is no wonder that some have made a case that, in

glorifying sport through common rituals, Americans are worshipping American society through these athletic contests.

Novak (1976) labels sport a “natural” religion. Participation in sport drives man “godward.” He becomes “in touch with certain dimly perceived feelings of human life within the cosmos” (p. 20). Further, “sports flow outward into action from a deep natural impulse that is radically religious: an impulse of freedom...a zest for symbolic meaning, and a longing for perfection” (p. 19). Of course, sport is not “a religion in the same way that Methodism...is a religion,” but is instead similar to a secular or civil religion (p. 18).

Bellah (1967) described the emergence of a common religious orientation shared by the majority of Americans that has underpinned and maintained many of America’s historical institutions as a civil religion. Using patriotic rituals and ceremonies, religious holidays, and sacred texts, this civil religion ties Americans together in a common national faith that also accommodates the many individual faiths. Scholars have dealt with sport as a civil religion (Coakley, 2008), as well as a sub-category of civil religion known as folk religion (Ladd & Mathison, 1999). Sport becomes a folk religion when it incorporates a set of values, myths, beliefs, and ritualistic practices that evoke tradition in ways similar to traditional religion.

Common sense tells us that any attempt to equate sport with religion is misguided. One researcher argued that, while sport and religion may share some common attributes (e.g. sacred space, ritual, ceremonies), the term religion does not stretch enough to include such things as sport. It is the “uncomfortable prerogative” of religion to serve such functions as 1) accounting for man’s origin, 2) answering questions of ultimate concern, and 3) grappling with such issues as pain, disease and death. Sport, of course, does not serve in a similar manner. Thus, taking the metaphor of sport as a religion literally would be a mistake (Hoffman, pp.55-61).

While it seems apparent that sport is not religion in a traditional sense, unless one engages in a serious redefining of the term religion, a question of interest is whether sport and physical activity can be a legitimate arena for religious experience and expression. Slusher (1976) notes the religious qualities of the sporting experience, “Within the movements of the athlete a wonderful mystery of life is present, a mystical experience that is too close to the religious to call it anything else” (p. 127). Through this mystical experience, the athlete can encounter that which is beyond reality. However, we must understand religious experience in general before we label participation in sport as an avenue for such experience.

Religious Experience as Knowledge?

Philosophers over the last few centuries have questioned the validity of religious experience as a verifiable and reliable source of knowledge. Scientific positivists of the past, as well as vocal skeptics and atheists in recent years, challenge religious assumptions and experience primarily on the meaningfulness of religious statements and practices. The present discussion cannot deal with this debate in any exhaustive way. Instead, outlining one strand of this historical debate will facilitate discussion of a specific kind of religious experience and will lead to an argument for such experience within sport and physical activity.

Opponents of religious experience as legitimate knowledge argue that religious statements are meaningless; they are incapable of being either falsified or verified in an empirical sense. Proponents of religious experience as genuine knowledge argue that religious statements can be as justified and reasonable as other claims to knowledge. The progenitor of modern skepticism regarding religious claims was David Hume. Hume's writings led to other positivist thinkers like Comte, Russell, and, more recently, John Hick and Antony Flew. The famous gardener metaphor used by Flew (and borrowed from John Wisdom) outlines the basic challenge to religious experience as knowledge.

Flew believed that religious assertions, like all other assertions, should be capable of being proved empirically false. Since no possible situation could arise in which the religious believer would believe that the propositions "a gardener exists," or "God is good" are false, then such religious statements are incapable of falsification. Thus, religious assertions as statements of knowledge are devoid of content, meaningless, and even irrational (Hick, 1990, pp. 367-369). While current philosophers continue to invoke this assertion of the meaninglessness and irrationality of religious statements (Dawkins, 2006; Moreland & Nielson, 1993), many disagree with requiring scientific reasonableness to statements of religious experience.

Recent philosophers, and especially Christian thinkers like Alvin Plantinga, address the oft-cited criticism of religion as unacceptable for intelligent individuals because of a lack of warrant. He targets the Freudian and Marxist critique that theistic belief "doesn't originate in the proper function of cognitive faculties successfully aimed at producing true beliefs" (Cignall, 2003, p. 22). This "classic" objection portrays religious belief as wishful thinking, the opiate that stupefies the masses. Plantinga responds by developing an alternative religious (and specifically Christian) explanation of knowledge. Plantinga does not set out to establish the existence of God on the basis of arguments and evidence. He instead reasons that "classical foundationalism," the common modern philosophical view of knowledge production, cannot meet its own standards and is therefore unable to comment on the rationality of religious belief (Plantinga, 1990, 492). He formulates an epistemology of religious belief whereby we develop religious propositions "in the basic way." Beliefs are neither infallibly true (self-evident) nor are they dependent upon the evidence of other established beliefs. Instead, knowledge consists of beliefs that are "properly basic." Knowledge of such beliefs must include true belief and warrant. Simple true belief is not enough to constitute knowledge. For example, if I hold the belief that, because I saw the president of the International Olympic Committee attending the summer Games in Beijing for free I can also attend them for free, this belief would not constitute "properly basic" knowledge. I would not be "warranted" in holding it since warrant applies the further notion of "proper function" to our cognitive faculties and perceptions:

A belief has warrant for a person *S* only if that belief is produced in *S* by cognitive faculties functioning properly (subject to no dysfunction) in a cognitive environment that is appropriate for *S*'s kind of cognitive faculties, according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at truth (Plantinga, 2000, p. 156).

For instance, my faculty of vision would produce a belief that does not have warrant if something were to cause my eyes to malfunction (for example, if the room I am currently in suddenly morphed into a house of mirrors at a carnival). But there is an additional and important criterion for the “basic way” of determining belief in God to be rational. This criterion involves certain experiential conditions that call forth such belief.

Knowledge of God can be “triggered” through various conditions and circumstances in life to produce beliefs about and experiences of God. The experience of such propositional truth can be roughly called “inductive,” as it is arrived at from the bottom up in the form of conditions that call forth belief in propositions that can be “argued to and tested by a relevant set of examples [conditions]” (Plantinga, 1990, p. 498). These conditions lead to or infer the belief itself. Examples of such conditions in this inductive process include the glories of nature, gratitude for the pleasures of life, the sense of contingency in the world, and even experiences of danger, pain, or suffering. Such conditions provide a testing ground for determining the “proper basicity” of religious propositions. Returning to the nonreligious example of the IOC president and free access to the Olympic Games: I would quickly discover that, upon testing the conditions under which I saw the president enter the Games, my belief that I should also have free access would not be warranted. Though my vision was functioning properly, conditions such as IOC regulations, security protocols, and ticketing kiosks would quickly dissolve what I thought to be a justified belief in free admission. My belief lacked warrant and justification by specific conditions. Something analogous happens in the religious person and their sense of the divine, or what Plantinga refers to as the *sensus divinitatis*. Assuming that one’s cognitive faculties are functioning properly and “aimed at truth,” experiences of the religious can produce properly basic beliefs.

As long as the criterion for warrant is met, these conditions provide justification for religious belief as properly basic and rational. Such religious experiences are as epistemologically trustworthy as other “self-evident” beliefs as defined by “classical foundationalism” (Plantinga, p. 494-496). Assuming one’s metaphysical faculties are functioning properly, life provides wonderful opportunities for justified religious belief. Interesting to us, of course, are the opportunities within sport and physical activity.

Religious Experience in Sport

Religious experience is essentially private in nature. There can be no means of objective verification for such knowledge in the positivistic sense previously mentioned. William James labeled this quality *ineffability*, one of the “four marks” that justify a religious experience as mystical. For him, mysticism was at the center of all personal religious experience. Along with being incapable of adequate expression, mystical experience also involved *noetic* quality, *transiency*, and *passivity*. Directly related to the present discussion is the concept of *ineffability* (Hick, 1990, pp. 169-195).

One need not look far for examples of those who have experienced the ineffable within sport. While sport psychologists may define such instances as *peak* (Maslow, 1968) or *flow*

(Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) experiences, those with certain metaphysical propensities see such instances as deeply religious. Philosophers with similar propensities have referred to this religious experience in different ways. One scholar labeled such experience “the supernatural as it discloses itself to the religious mind” (Farmer, 1943, p. 162). Biblical scholar N.T. Wright (2006) labels these “thin spaces” where the veil between heaven and earth is pulled thin. Alvin Plantinga calls such instances “conditions and circumstances that call forth belief in God” (Hick, 1990, p. 495).

According to these thinkers various circumstances in life produce beliefs about and experiences of God. Most people have participated in some sort of physical activity where the “glories of nature” were evident. Rock climbers, runners, hikers, and other outdoor athletes regularly encounter these glories. These and similar circumstances provide experiences of God. The religious person will naturally tend to agree with these sacred interactions; however, even those without “religious minds” ought to pause to consider such experiences in light of the argument already presented. Non-religious people should not hastily disregard these experiences as attempts to force irrational meaning onto secular activities. These experiences can produce valid and justified knowledge that, coupled with other evidence, might even trigger belief in God in a way similar to Antony Flew, the long-time atheist now turned theist (2007).

Christian Worship in Sport

Sport and physical activity are also avenues for expressing gratitude and worship to God for the pleasures of life. A line from the familiar movie *Chariots of Fire* provides an example. Eric Liddell, a distance runner who competed in the 1924 Olympic Games and won the gold medal, would later serve as a missionary to China. When asked why he bothered with the trivialities of running and physical training despite his preparation to be a missionary he replied, “God has made me for a purpose, for China. But he has also made me fast, and when I run I feel His pleasure.” As professionals within a discipline centered on physical activity, we understand feelings of gratitude for the ability to participate in play and sport, and the pleasure that can come from such participation. Further, such participation can produce legitimate religious experience and the *sensus divinitatis*. For Christians and other religious adherents, sport can become an opportunity for worship. This holistic understanding of worship is echoed in the words of William Temple (1976):

Worship is the submission of all of our nature to God. It is the quickening of conscience by His holiness, nourishment of mind by His truth, purifying of imagination by His beauty, opening of the heart to His love, and submission of will to His purpose. All this gathered up in adoration is the greatest of all expressions of which we are capable (Watson, p.157).

In this definition worship binds all of life together and gives it a clear focus. It brings unity to the diverse aspects of our lives. Zacharias (1998) agrees that, “worship is the supreme expression in life, the root from which life’s branches grow and expressions flower...Worship is coextensive with life. Here the sacred and the secular meet” (p. 208). This conception of

worship is stable enough to include involvement with physical activity and sport. Thus, participation in physical activity can be a legitimate means of combining the sacred and the secular. However, play and sport are not ends in themselves, worthy of worship for their own sake. They are one of many of life's endeavors that provide an opportunity to worship God. When the object of worship becomes the sport experience itself, sport becomes religion. In the traditional conception of religion, this is paramount to idolatry. For Christians, a perspective on God's redemptive plan protects against such idolatry. Recognizing that the Judeo-Christian God will renew and transform space, time, *and matter* allows for a balance that neither rejects matter (i.e., the body) as worthless nor worships matter as an ultimate good. N.T. Wright (2008) summarizes, "the proper response to idolatry is therefore not dualism, the rejection of space, time, or matter as themselves evil or dangerous, but the renewed worship of the Creator God, which sets the context for the proper enjoyment and use of the created order without the danger of worshipping it." (p. 212).

Conclusion

The present discussion framed some contemporary views of religious knowledge and experience, and provided justification for religious, and specifically Christian, experience in sport and physical activity. Sport as religion in the traditional sense would amount to a contrived substitution of the secular in place of the sacred. Sport does, however, provide circumstances in which participants experience God and the sacred. Knowledge gained from such circumstances has as much warrant as any of our other perceptual knowledge. As the religious person uses play and sport as a means toward the end of religious experience, rather than an end in itself, an encounter with a sacred God is possible.

Incorporating such a view of sport and physical activity can help make our subject matter relevant to people in a way that transcends content knowledge. Infusing physical activity with relevance and meaning derived from religious experience will help in achieving lofty outcomes such as lifelong fitness participation and adherence to exercise programs. People enjoy those things that provide meaning and relevance to their lives. One challenge to sport and physical activity professionals is in presenting this opportunity for religious experience in ways that are inclusive and supportive rather than exclusive and divisive. Another challenge will be for kinesiology professionals to take Wuthnow's advice and examine the various effects of religion, and specifically Christianity, within the physical domain using social scientific and philosophical methods. Our discipline will benefit from the efforts.

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