God in the Stadium? Sport and Religion in the Modern Age

A LECTURE TO HIS ROYAL MAJESTY KING CARL XVI GUSTAF IN HONOUR OF HIS 70TH BIRTHDAY

BY PROF. HUGH MCLEOD, UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM
Your Royal Majesties,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to the Centre for Theology and Religious Studies!

It is a great privilege for our department to present Your Majesty with Lund University’s gift in honour of your 70th birthday. With this gift we would like to show our university’s appreciation of the work carried out by Your Majesty for research within all academic fields as well as for higher education.

Today we celebrate the 350th anniversary of our university. Theology and religious studies has been a fundamental part of the university since its very beginning. Over the centuries our department has been the abiding-place of many renowned scholars. Nowadays our department houses a wide range of academic disciplines within the field of theology and religious studies; spanning from research on ancient texts to research on contemporary phenomena within all religious traditions. With a combined historical and contemporary perspective, we aim to shed light on and explain complex issues that characterise our present day society. Every year we welcome more than 500 students to our different programmes and courses.

Over the last decade the connection between sports and religion has gained the interest of both theologians and historians. Scholars at our department have taken great interest in this evolving field of research.

The influence that the research conducted by Professor Hugh McLeod has had on this process should not be underestimated. By making extensive historical and sociological comparisons, Professor McLeod has shown the importance that religion and sports have had for people both in Europe and North America, but more importantly Professor McLeod has shown how sports have had an important place in religion, and how religion has had an important place in sports.

We have had the fortune of having Professor McLeod as an honorary doctor at our faculty since 2003, and today we are glad that he has returned to Lund to lecture on the theme: ‘God in the Stadium? Sport and Religion in the Modern Age’. It is our sincere hope that this theme can touch on some of Your Majesty’s interests.

Before handing over to Professor McLeod, I would like to express our deepest gratitude to Your Majesties for honouring us with your presence, and I would also, though somewhat belatedly, like to express Lund university’s congratulations on Your Majesty’s 70th birthday.

Alexander Maurits
Head of Department

Centre for Theology and Religious Studies
The Centre for Theology and Religious Studies (CTR) has existed under various names in Lund ever since the university was founded. CTR conducts teaching in the specialisations of History of Religions and Religious Behavioural Science, Biblical Studies, Church and Mission Studies and Studies in Faith and World Views. Research is carried out within all the disciplines of Religious Studies and Theology.
Hugh McLeod
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God in the Stadium?
SPORT AND RELIGION IN THE MODERN AGE

This is a stained glass window in one of the world’s most grandiose Christian churches, the Anglican Cathedral of St John the Divine in New York. It depicts, not, as one might expect, scenes from the Bible, but an athletic young man rowing in a boat race. This is part of a chapel with windows picturing several sports. It is said to be a favourite site for the weddings and funerals of sportspeople. The plans for the chapel were prepared by the then bishop, William Manning, in 1925. They clearly reflected the enormous role of men’s sports, and increasingly of women’s sports too, in American life.

The later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had seen the emergence of most of the world sports of today, with Great Britain and North America playing a key role. Baseball, basketball, volleyball, lawn tennis and cycling were among the sports invented in this period; the various forms of football and hockey were codified; golf and cricket spread across the globe from their original homes in Scotland and England. The Olympic Games were revived in 1896. There was a huge growth both in amateur sport, and in the numbers of people watching professional sport.

The church wanted to be identified with this new popular passion. But there was more to it than that. The sporting windows were part of a wider series of windows celebrating areas of human achievement, such as medicine and the arts. They were part of Bishop Manning’s campaign against the ‘Puritan tradition’ still influential in the USA, and they were intended as a statement that Christianity must be concerned with all areas of life and with everything that contributes to human well-being, rather than being confined to a narrow area defined as religious.

Moreover, the church was not merely responding to the fashion of the moment. The Christian churches had played an active role in the rise of modern sports in the second half of the nineteenth century – first in Western Europe and North America and then, through the efforts of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) and of Catholic and Protestant missionaries, in other parts of the world.

Many star athletes had their first successes in church clubs, and many outstanding teams have had religious roots. Aston Villa, the superstars of English football in the 1890s, began as a Methodist church team; and still today there are major clubs with a strong religious identity, a Swedish example being Assyriska FF founded by Syrian Orthodox refugees, which retains an Assyrian identity, even though nowadays no more than half the players belong to this community themselves.

In the nineteenth century there were tensions, even conflicts, in the relationship between religion and sport and there still are today. But throughout this period there has also been common ground. I shall begin by looking at this common ground, showing how religions have made use of sport, and how religion has been used in the pursuit of sporting success. Later I shall look at the tensions.

The Christian sporting movement began in the 1850s in Britain and the USA, where it was called ‘Muscular Christianity’. The pioneers of Muscular Christianity were liberal Protestants...
and their advocacy of sport was part of a wider liberalising agenda. Their polemic was directed against both Evangelical Protestants and Catholics. In particular they accused the Evangelicals, a very powerful force both in Britain and in the USA, of erecting artificial barriers between the spiritual and the secular, and of alienating men from the church by their attacks on sport.

The Muscular Christian ideal was reflected in the statue of ‘The Christian Student’, erected at Princeton University in 1913. The student had died prematurely, after a brilliant university career in which he had captained the football team, led the YMCA and graduated with high academic honours. He is dressed in football kit, but is wearing an academic gown and is carrying a pile of books. The mixing of faith with sport and study reflected a concept of the balanced life in which the spiritual, the intellectual and the physical each had an essential place and each supported the other.

The debate concerning the relationship between the church and sport was at its peak in the later nineteenth century in Britain and the USA; in Sweden this happened rather later, in the 1920s and ’30s. But the arguments on either side of the debate were similar. While few people thought that sport was bad in itself, many Evangelicals and Pietists saw it as a waste of time – something too trivial as well as too worldly to interest converted Christians; there was also the fear that sport could bring young Christians into bad company, where drinking, gambling and bad language were normal; and of course there was the problem of Sunday sport.

The case for a positive relationship was made by Archbishop Söderblom in a speech at the opening of the Swedish skiing championships in 1929. Söderblom drew extensively from the letters of St Paul, as well as other New Testament passages, in praising the athlete’s quest for perfection, the discipline that sport requi-

red, and the courage shown in the conquest of pain. And like the British ‘Muscular Christians’ he highlighted not only the benefits to health, but the benefits to society. He claimed that sport brought together people of all social classes and political persuasions. Like other Christian apologists for sport, such as Pope John Paul II, he recognised that sport could also have a darker side, but the balance was decidedly positive.

And in spite of their initial doubts, both Evangelicals and Catholics soon came to realise the value of sport. Evangelicals were attracted mainly by the evangelistic uses of sport as a means of attracting young men to the church. Catholics saw this too, but they also realised that sport could be a political weapon in the church’s battles with its enemies.

In the later nineteenth century the Catholic Church was in intermittent warfare with the state, both in Protestant-dominated societies such as Germany, and in those like France dominated by anti-clerical liberals. In France the Republicans had come to power in 1879 with a programme of secularisation. The Republicans had their own sporting federation, so the Catholics formed a rival organisation. Both organised large scale gymnastic displays preceded by marches through the streets of the host city intended as a show of strength.

Both Catholics and Republicans had their own youth clubs. The Catholic youth clubs were leaders in the early spread of football and later basketball, and anxious anti-clericals feared that football was the church’s secret weapon in the battle for the nation’s male youth. The Republican clubs were the leaders in rugby, but Republicans played football too. When in 1905, at the height of the church-state war, the Catholic champions defeated the Republican champions, this victory was treated by the Catholic press as being a religious and political as much as a merely sporting triumph.

Meanwhile British soldiers, teachers and missionaries had brought cricket to India. Here too sport was tightly bound up with religious and political conflict. Cricket soon became a means of beating the imperial masters at their own game as well as pursuing the rivalries between the major religious communities into which the country was divided.

The first community to take a strong interest in cricket were the Parsees (Zoroastrians) and in 1886 it was a team of Parsees that was the first from India to tour England. Elite cricket was for many years pursued along communal lines, the most important event of the year being a Quadrangular tournament in which what was called a ‘European’ team played against those of the Hindus, the Muslims and the Parsees. In some regions there was also a Sikh team. In the early 1930s relations were so bad either between the British rulers and Indian nationalists or between Hindus and Muslims that these events had to be cancelled, but they were quickly resumed when the political temperature cooled. Enthusiastic British administrators saw the Indian adoption of the English national game as a means of bringing rulers and ruled closer together, but more often it became a focus both for developing nationalism and for the communal tensions that would eventually divide India and bring terrible bloodshed.
As this example suggests, the link between religion and sport could be both a means of strengthening bonds within a religious community and of emphasising their separation from other communities. In societies that are religiously homogeneous, shared religious loyalties and ritual may be a means of binding together the members of the national team. For example, more than ninety per cent of Pakistanis are Muslim and cricket is their national sport.

In the early twenty-first century Islam was playing a bigger role than ever in the national team, partly because of the enthusiasm of the then captain. They prayed together during practices and religious meetings were held in the team hotels. One symptom was the conversion in 2005 of the only Christian player. In 2006 the Chairman of the Pakistan cricket board wondered if things had gone too far. ‘There is no doubt,’ he said, ‘that religious faith is a motivating factor for them. It binds them together.’ But he wanted them to ‘strike a balance between religion and cricket.’ In particular, he feared that undue pressure was being placed on less devout members of the team.

In more pluralistic and more secular societies the use of religion to bond a team together is likely to be counter-productive, but it may be vitally important for individual athletes. Faith-driven athletes find in their reading of the Bible or the Qur’an, or in their personal relationship with Jesus, the strength to face the trials and tribulations of elite sport, including not only the disciplines of training and of overcoming physical pain, but also the bitterness of defeat. One example would be Ayrton Senna, three times Formula One world champion, who was a devout Catholic. His deadly rival, Alain Prost, claimed that Senna believed he had divine protection and this encouraged him to take risks that other drivers would not dare to hazard.

Many faith-driven athletes are Evangelical Protestants, like Simone Manuel. Manuel was the first African-American woman to win an individual gold medal in swimming, often seen as a ‘white’ sport. After her victory in the 100 metres freestyle at Rio she declared ‘All I can say is “All glory to God”. It’s definitely been a long journey these last four years … and I’m just so blessed to have a gold medal.’ Via Facebook and Twitter she referred to the support given by her Baptist church in Houston and she explained her belief that her swimming prowess was a gift from God which she had a duty to use to the full.

There are Evangelical athletes in many countries but in the USA they gain further strength from being part of a movement. Since the 1950s, and more especially since the 1970s the Fellowship of Christian Athletes has promoted the links between Christianity and sport in schools and colleges and has encouraged its members to give testimonies to their faith whenever opportunity arises. They argue that in a society obsessed with sport, people will listen to athletes when they talk about their faith, although they would not listen to a minister of religion. Already in the 1970s Billy Graham was claiming that there were more born-again Christians among professional athletes than in any other profession.

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However, sport has also been used to challenge religion – or at least religion as it is normally understood.

In 1898 the Paris-based writer Max Nordau, addressing a Zionist congress, called for a ‘Muscular Judaism’. Muscular Christianity had been a reform movement within Christianity, but Muscular Judaism was not so much a reform as an abolition of the Jewish religion as traditionally understood. Nordau’s ‘New Jew’, with both the mental and the physical strength to achieve the goals of Zionism was placed in conscious opposition to the ‘Old Jew’, the scholar with ‘weak muscles’, indifferent to politics, unable to fight, and buried in the study of the Bible and the Talmud.

Inspired by these ideas a Jewish sports club, Hakoah, was formed in Vienna in 1909. The name meant ‘The Strength’ in Hebrew. Male members were especially strong in football and wrestling, female members in swimming. The champion swimmer, Hedy Bienenfeld would, one assumes, have been a woman after Max Nordau’s heart – even if his ‘Muscular Judaism’ seems originally to have been intended for men.

She is shown here with a star of David on her swimsuit – a clear statement of her Jewishness. But she is a Jewish woman of a new kind. The symbols of her modernity and emancipation are not only the stylish swim-suit (which she earned a living by modelling), but also the lipstick, the fashionable hair-style, and above all the cigarette poised between her fingers.

In 1925 the footballers won the Austrian championship after a match with a fairy-tale ending. In the closing minutes scores were level when the Hakoah goalkeeper collided with an opposing forward, severely injuring his arm. He could not continue in goal, but since substitutes were not allowed he returned to the field with his arm in a sling and scored the winning goal.
Finally, there is the claim that sport is itself a new religion – a message proclaimed by sports fans, journalists and even sociologists. There is nothing new in these claims. As early as the 1870s some of the pioneers of ‘Muscular Christianity’ were beginning to wonder whether they had helped to create a monster which had got out of control. They had wanted a balanced life in which sport was an important part, but certainly not the most important part. They were alarmed by the rise of sporting fanaticism.

There are several reasons for the claim that sport, and especially football, has taken on the characteristics of a religion. Just as St Paul drew upon sporting metaphors, many sports writers employ religious metaphors – they speak of faith, saviours, redemption − even crucifixions. For many people attachment to a team is their strongest form of personal identity. Sporting fanaticism has been the cause of murders, suicides and even divorces. There is the emergence since the 1970s of Sunday sport as an alternative to Sunday School. Particularly significant here is the tendency of parents to see Sunday School and sport as more or less interchangeable – wholesome activities which will keep the youngsters out of mischief and help them to grow into decent adults. There is the cult surrounding some outstanding athletes, whose sporting qualities qualify them for a kind of sporting sainthood. I am not referring here to those like the Scottish runner, Eric Liddell of ‘Chariots of Fire’ fame, who is regarded as a saint by the American Anglican Church – on the basis of his exceptional sporting achievements combined with exceptional moral virtues – but to those whose virtues are purely sporting. An example would be the American long-distance runner Steve Prefontaine (known to his fans simply as ‘Pre’) killed in a car crash in 1975 while returning late at night from a party.

The site of the fatal crash has become a place of pilgrimage. As one pilgrim commented, ‘Some people run with Jesus. I run with Pre.’ Another claimed to have prayed to Pre when in pain during a race. Even the elements recognised Pre’s presence – the clouds would part and the sun start shining as Pre stepped onto the track. Prefontaine was revered not so much for any virtues of a more general kind, though fans appreciated his willingness to share a beer with them, but for his ‘gutsy’ style, his apparent indifference to physical pain, and his devotion to the art of running.

Already in the later nineteenth century, and even more in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, sport was increasingly being canvassed as something inherently good, which brought benefits to the soul as much as the body. At the same time, it came to be bound up with national identities, as the embodiment of national virtues, enjoying a quasi-sacred status. Here we need to make a clear distinction between recreational sport and elite sport. Amateur sport can be a source of great pleasure to all those involved, both because of the sport itself and of the comraderie which it brings. Elite sport is very different, because the imperative for the player or team to win and for the fans to share in the victory is in constant conflict with any concept of sporting ethics. These problems have been made much worse as elite sport has become big business, involving huge amounts of money as well as national prestige.
Lund University is celebrating 350 years!

The anniversary will take place from 19 December, 2016 until 28 January, 2018. The dates reflect the founding and inauguration of the university. We invite students, employees, alumni and friends of the university to take part in the jubilee. The jubilee programme offers events such as concerts, exhibitions and cultural activities to scientific theme weeks on issues of concern, publication of jubilee books and festivities.

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