This Ruff Guide is designed to introduce the topic of Sport and Religion. What, we might ask, have sport and religion got in common? The truth is that, in Britain at least, these two cultural practices share a good deal of common ground primarily as a consequence of the role that the Protestant church played in the development of sport in Victorian times. Over the past 30-40 years there has been a steady growth in the academic literature concerning the relationship between sport and religion. What the present discussion aims to do is to map out the key historical features of this relationship within the UK context.

**Sport and the English Public Schools**

A popular argument surrounding the relationship between sport and religion in Britain is that during the mid-19th 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 (Mangan, 1981). This transformation, it is argued, primarily took place through the work of Thomas Arnold, Headteacher of Rugby school between 1828-1841. Arnold's appointment at Rugby came amidst widespread criticisms of unruliness and disorder in the public schools and at a time when broader fears of moral breakdown prevailed. Arnold resolved to remedy such evils at Rugby by introducing new forms of governance and new curricular ventures. Central to these reforms were his religious beliefs and a desire to transform his young charges into 'good Christian gentlemen'. The introduction of sport and physical activity into the curriculum at Rugby is seen as one of Arnold's most significant achievements. Yet the Arnoldian regime amounted to much more than simply playing games. In addition, an education in the 'classics' was regarded as the guardian of moral character, and the passing of responsibility to older pupils (prefects) as the gateway to discipline, respect and 'Christian manliness'. Word of Arnold's reforms - particularly the introduction of games playing - quickly spread with Head teachers of other schools following suit. Indeed, news of Arnold's work travelled fast both inside and outside of the public schools. One reason for this was the writings of two well known authors of the time, Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes.
Sport, Protestantism and Victorian Values

During the mid 19th century Charles Kingsley (clergyman, academic, novelist and poet), and his associate, Thomas Hughes (lawyer, politician and novelist), became key figures in the relationship between sport and religion. Perhaps most notable in this respect was Hughes's 1857 publication, *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, the story of a boy (Tom Brown) whose character is shaped by his educational experiences at Rugby school. 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.

The sense of high moral value and manly Christian endeavour embedded in the story-line formed the basis of what came to be known as 'muscular Christianity', a term encapsulating notions of spiritual, moral and physical purity. In reality muscular Christianity had at its roots in a whole range of social and ethical concerns prevalent at the time: the protection of the weak, the plight of the poor, and, perhaps most importantly, the promotion of moral virtue. Ideas surrounding the development of spiritual and moral purity through physical endeavour resulted in the establishment of a series of values which subsequently 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, courage, temperance and *esprit de corps* (teamwork; a shared spirit of dedication to a cause). An example of how the sport-religion relationship might play out and how a culmination of at least some of these values might come together can be seen in the 1980 film *Chariots of Fire*, where GB athlete Eric Liddell (a committed Christian) refuses to take part a heat of the 100 metres at the 1924 Olympics because the race was to take place on a Sunday, only to win the 400 metres two days later (see Cashmore, 2008). Likewise, these generic values are clearly articulated as underpinning features of the Olympic Games themselves. Indeed, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and of the modern Olympics was familiar with Thomas Hughes' novels and, after visiting Rugby in 1883, was said to be heavily influenced by the work of Thomas Arnold. De Coubertin's endorsement of the Arnoldian regime provides evidence of the way in which such ideals came to spread beyond Britain's shores. In fact, one of the legacies of the public schools was their broader geographical impact as sport and games became an integral part of the development of the British Empire.

It is also important to locate the emergence of muscular Christianity against a broader social backdrop. The rapid onset of industrialisation in 19th century Britain stimulated significant changes in social life which, in turn, generated a series of fears over issues such as health, sanitation and welfare. This led to a desire on the part of the middle and upper classes to improve and refine both the fortunes and the habits of ordinary working folk; a movement which Holt (1989) has referred to as 'rational recreation'. Rational recreation comprised the will of the
social elite to reform society by re-directing the energies of the masses away from the vagaries of drinking, gambling and disorder and towards new forms of social behaviour. The church was part of this process. During the mid-late 19th century it was not uncommon, for example, for clergy and church leaders to be involved in sporting provision. Employers had similar ideas with some providing sports facilities for their workers alongside more general encouragements to take regular physical exercise thereby aiding levels of health and productivity.

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

Given the class tensions surrounding sport and other popular cultural pastimes during the Victorian period, how exactly, we might ask, was the relationship between the Protestant church and sport configured? In line with other historians, McLeod (2003, 2007), has noted that from the 1850s onwards, sport grew in popularity in Britain and, as a consequence, the church came to recognise more readily the value of sporting endeavour both in terms of its social status and its religious significance. It is clear, for example, that from this time on the Anglican Church encouraged sporting links primarily out of a desire to eradicate the strong sense of 'puritanism' permeating its orbits and the alienation that this subsequently caused. Lupson (2006) has highlighted in detail the involvement of church and chapel during the mid-19th century in the formation of football league teams. Likewise, the work of Cox (1982) and Williams (1990, 1996) has charted the connections between the church and cricket in various geographical regions and localities of Britain.

The inclusion of sport as a part of church life, McLeod argues, 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 ad hoc play and games. 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 interests of the young. But church provision in this area was more complex than simply the organisation of football teams and sporting fixtures. 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.
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 (2003), the developing relationship between sport and the church in the mid-late 19th century can be summarised via a chronological framework comprising five broad categories. First, the spontaneous emergence of sporting activities along the lines of ‘fellowship and fun’. Second, the provision of sports 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-time and sporting resources in order to attract people from outside of the church. Fourthly, the promotion of sport and physical activity by clergy as a legitimate and beneficial form of personal development. And fifth, the eventual acceptance of sport by congregations as an established part of church life.

What McLeod neatly establishes via this framework is that between 1850-1930 the Protestant church in Britain witnessed something of a U-turn with respect to its overall view of sport. Accordingly, it could be argued that sport added to what some have observed to be a broader secularization of the church during this period. Moreover, as links between sport and the church grew, so too did the opportunity for related developments to take place. For example, there is evidence of a strong take up of muscular Christian values in the US around this time most notably via the establishment of the YMCA in 1883 and subsequently the Boys Brigade in 1899. Following this the post-1945 period witnessed a significant rise in neo-evangelicalism on both sides of the Atlantic which brought with it a wide-range of sports mission organisations such as the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and Athletes in Action in the US, and Christians in Sport in the UK (see Watson et al., 2005, Watson, 2007). Alas, though the UK saw a boom in secular sporting provision during the second half of the 20th century, such growth does not appear to have been replicated within church settings. On the contrary, the demise of sporting activity in many UK churches throughout these years serves to further illustrate the vibrancy of church sport during the Victorian period.

Conclusions

This discussion has sought to argue that the relationship between sport and religion was firmly cemented in Victorian Britain. Through the work of Thomas Arnold at Rugby School and via the influence of writers such as Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes, longstanding religious values began to permeate sporting endeavour both at grass roots and elite levels. A series of broader social conditions and circumstances also nurtured this relationship, one of which was a middle and upper class pre-occupation with the social habits and pastimes of the industrialised
working classes. In this sense, sport in Victorian Britain emerged both as a popular leisure-time pursuit and as a means by which churches could engage with a wider public audience. Against this backdrop those with first hand experience of developments in the Protestant church suggest that interest in the sport-religion relationship is now re-emerging, as is the role of sports ministers. Needless to say, only time will tell how, and to what extent, this resurgence will take shape.

References


Williams, J. (1990), 'Recreational cricket in the Bolton Area between the Wars', in R Holt (ed.) Sport and the Working Class in Modern Britain, Manchester, Manchester University Press, pp. 101-120.


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Editor's comments - *It is ironic and indeed sad, that many undergraduates reading sport in*
modern universities suspend the practice of faith for their undergraduate years and that sports courses in higher education sometimes shy away from contextualising sport in religion....... ironic since the origins and development of many universities are so closely connected with religious institutions.

We are grateful to Professor Andrew Parker for the provision of this Ruff Guide. Professor Parker is course leader for the MA in Sport & Christian Outreach at the University of Gloucestershire.