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# Can Sports Exist Without Religion?

Ruphine S. Obare

Sheffield University, UK

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## Introduction

Throughout history, humanity has invented sports primarily as a means to meet socially with others to display skills and physical prowess and to entertain or offer excitement. Many early cultures like the ancient Greeks and the Aztec Indians incorporated religious and political elements into their games but there was always a desire for recreational play that eventually inspired the codification of early games and the invention of new ones.

*Religion is defined as "Human beings" relation to that which they regard as holy, sacred, spiritual, divine. It is commonly regarded as consisting of a person's relation to God or to gods or spirits. Worship is probably the most basic element of religion, but moral conduct, right belief and participation in religious institutions are generally also constituent elements of the religious life as practised by believers and as commanded by religious sages and scriptures."* (Encyclopaedia Britannica)

*"Functionalists have defined religion in terms of beliefs and actions related to ultimate concerns or symbols which formulate conceptions of a general order of existence"* (Mann, M 1983)

Religion is thus seen in one such model where all the rules, norms, values, dogmas, truth, denomination, conviction, and principles come out with one common meaning Beliefs, Creed, Doctrine, and Faith.

People often use religious beliefs and rituals to provide them with psychological support in the face of uncertainty. Religions provide systems of meanings that can be used

to make sense out of one's life. Because religious beliefs and rituals are shared, they can provide a basis for group integration and unity, and because they are related to the sacred and supernatural, they can be used as a powerful basis for social control on both the individual and group levels. It is partly because religions can do these things that religious beliefs have become used in certain sport context.

*"Sport is an abbreviation; shortened form of disport meaning a diversion and an amusement. It has a rooted meaning in Latin which means carry away." (Brasch, R 1972). "Sports and games are recreational or competitive activities that involve some amount of physical strength or skill". (Encyclopaedia Britannica)*

*"Professionals define sports as an institutionalised physical activity in which rules are fixed externally and before hand. In its broader concept it embraces athletics, games play, gymnastics and activities of an individual and team variety, competitive and non-competitive". (Bennett, 1975)*

## **Role of Religion**

*"The Durkheimian belief is that religion is a functional universal in all societies but it achieves that goal at the cost of any substantive content". (Mann, M 1983)* Religion fosters friendship; most societies see it as a means of recreation. People converge in churches and mosques on days of worship to meet friends and business associates. Some regard it as a form of leisure.

There is no racial prejudice as it knows no bounds; religion advocates for love brotherhood and social cohesion: the Roman Catholic Church used Latin as a medium of worship to promote this co-existence up to mid twentieth century.

There are many similarities between the "moral community" of Freudian analysts and that of church, or between the sacred heroes and rituals of Catholicism and those the Bolsheviks. This is a manifestation of religion acting as a guide to society's moral values and winning people's souls to the creator. Every religious sect be it Christian, Hindu, or Muslim recognise a Supreme Being no matter what they perceive Him (It) to be. Religion promotes discipline; the mind is always put to rest in a state of relaxation during the examination of conscience. This serves as an antidote to stress and depression.

Processions and pilgrimages are a way of exalting God's name and relaxing the body and mind. Muslims hold this view during the *circumbulation* around the *Kaaba* during

the *Haj*.

Society is always reminded of their religious obligations during social or political gatherings. God's name is always uttered and this brings about an automatic feeling of sacredness irrespective of the place or situation. Examples-Britain's National Anthem "God Save The Queen"; Kenya's National Anthem "Oh God Of All Creation, Bless This Our Land And Nation"

The role of religion could thus be summarised in the following:

- Is concerned with the sacred and supernatural realm.
- Its purpose is to transcend the circumstances and conditions of material life in the pursuit of spiritual goals.
- It is fundamentally rooted in faith.
- Emphasises a spirit of service and love.
- Its rituals are essentially expressive and process-oriented.
- It is fundamentally mystical and pure.
- Emphasises asceticism; stress discipline, self-denial, repetition and the development of character.

## **Role of Sports**

*"Sports act as physical outlets; they allow participants to work out aggressive energies and emotions through involvement in the competitive recreational activity".* (Encyclopaedia Britannica) Sports are accessible ways of gaining respect and admiration through the exhibition of skill and prowess. As entertainment, they provide diversion from the demands of day-to-day living and allow the spectator to enjoy much of the experience of play without actual involvement.

Sports bring co-operation among individual groups and societies. It fosters friendship. It enhances discipline through the rules and regulations in a game. Sports contribute to social co-existence. *"The constant and indispensable involvement of the crowd in the West Indian cricket can be paralleled in many other Afro-Caribbean cultural institutions where there is no absolute clear-cut separation between 'performers' and 'spectators'".* (Jarvie, G 1991)

It can evoke intense excitement and emotional commitment from individuals and

groups. It helps in the stress management whether as a spectator or as a participant. It emphasises asceticism; all coaches promote the notion of 'no pain no gain'.

In summary, the role of sports is:

- To pursue personal achievement and self-promotion.
- To be instrumental and goal-oriented in whatever one does.
- To always be prepared for competition
- To promote and develop social co-existence.

### **The Co-existence of Sports and Religion**

Durkheim in his study of religion explored the functional relationship between the sacred and the profane elements in society. The extraordinary prominence given to the role of sport in the modern world may make it akin to the sacred, but it also highlights the role of the profane.

In the Mediaeval period, sporting activities tended to remain part of the religious feasts and festivals until the Middle Ages when the sporting competitions began to be pursued on a regular basis outside the control of religious leaders. For many centuries, sport and games were under church control because of their concern for the body and soul. Sport competition was permitted only on holidays (holy days) associated with celebrations of religious rites or festivals (e.g. births, baptisms, confirmations, weddings, etc). Huzinga (1976) states that "the great competitions in archaic cultures had always formed part of the sacred festivals and were indispensable as health and happiness-bringing activities".

According to Brasch, (1972) "the rainmaking priests of the primitive tribes were the first team of professional players whose sole task was to join in games of chance which they believed would force nature to precipitate rain".

Sports thus assumed a cosmic significance. Definite rules in primitive ball games were religiously observed to direct the winds; the bringers of life. The two teams represented earth and sky; and as not one would dare to cheat the gods, an umpire was unnecessary. *"No wonder that primitive man believed that sport, if not divine itself, was a gift of the gods. He was firmly convinced that "to play the game," meant to accelerate the revival of the nature and the victory of negotiation"* ( Brasch, 1972).

Among the Zuris of Mexico, sports begun as fertility magic, to ensure birth, growth

and the return of spring. Therefore it was a magic rite. It tried to attain human survival by supernatural means. During drought, these people played particular games convinced that this would magically bring rain to enable their crops to grow. This association of prehistoric games with worship permeated with the classical period.

*"The Indian games of North America were essentially religious rites; they were more religion than **play** in today's meaning of the term. As such non Indians were not usually allowed to view these activities in their traditional form"* (Coakley, J 1994)

Sporting pictures adorned the walls of Egyptian temples. The pharaohs and their nobles enjoyed sport, not merely as spectators but as participants. *"The Pythian games were closely linked with the oracle of Apollo and his shrine at Delphi"* (Brasch, 1972).

The Olympic games centred on the magnificent temple of Zeus at Olympia; and when the ancient Olympics begun in 776 B.C the Greeks offered sacrifices and took oaths in honour of Zeus to emphasise the games' religious significance. This religious phenomenon continued to be used by Pierre de Coubertin in his writings of the modern Olympic movement. The important source of this movement was the search for a "humanistic" or "civil" religion. Thus the sentiments, themes, conceptions and actions pervading Olympism and the Olympic Games have religious connotations.

The Rastafarian movement, which started in the West Indies in the 1930s, believes in spreading their religion through the reggae music and dance. They regard all rastafarians to be followers of their god Jah and insist that the reggae dance is part and parcel of their religion.

In the traditional African society, sports and religion were one functional unity. The wrestling contests of the Ibo of West Africa could not take place before the oracles of the hills gave their consent through the priests and priestesses of the clan. According to Achebe, (1980) the elders of the two communities involved in the wrestling contest visited the shrines and consulted their gods, offering sacrifices, led by their priests and priestesses, for blessings to ensure they won the contest. During the contest, the drummers beat their drums like those possessed and this it was believed signified the presence of the spirits who were the determinants in the results of the contest.

In the modern society today, there are a number of interesting parallels between sports and religion, including the "worship" of athletes as gods and heroes (e.g. Michael Jordan) the "idolisation of former athletes in Sport Halls of Fame (Sebastian Coe), the daily "reading" of the sport pages by the "devout" fan, the collection of "symbols of

Faith" such as trophies, baseballs, game balls, and sport-related souvenirs, and the charisma that is attached to the elites and leaders in the sport milieu.

Sport and religion have often been used to create strong collective emotions and celebrate selected group values through rituals and public events. There are many anecdotal examples of how religion has been used to simply reaffirm and intensify orientations that lead to success in competitive sports.

Hoffman (1992) challenges those with doubts on the co-existence of sport and religion by emphasising dimensions of training and sport participation that fit well with the certain aspects of the Protestant Ethic. This strategy as mentioned in the role of sport involves focusing on sacrifice and pain as indicators of moral worth, striving to achieve "total release performance", and abandoning the notion that the human body is sacred.

Athletes and coaches may use their religion as a source of psychological support as they cope with the challenge and uncertainty of competition, and as they try to find special meaning for their sports lives. Coaches may also use various forms of religion and religious beliefs to produce team unity and establish a basis for social control over their athlete. This habit is very common in schools and college sports (in some parts of the world) where special religious services are conducted prior to any crucial match. Players converging and praying or performing some rituals before a kick-off is not an unusual or uncommon sight in today's sporting competitions. Womack, M in Hoffman's (1992) book says about these rituals "*They frequently use rituals to make them feel as if they have some control over what happens to them. The uncertainty that exists in highly competitive sports is so great that many athletes use rituals. The use of rituals among athletes has become so widespread that it has been described by journalists and voted by many spectators*". It should not escape one's mind that rituals are grounded in religion, magic and personal habits. Moreover, ritual and ceremony whether in religion or sport, reinforce values and beliefs. In terms of ceremony, the spectacle of the modern Olympic Games with the ritualistic and lavish opening and closing ceremonies complete with torch, oath, flags, and symbolism cannot go unmentioned.

"Religious beliefs and rituals can provide athletes with physical and spiritual reinforcement, relieve anxiety, help them concentrate and face competition with confidence, and supply reasons for practising and developing physical skills" (Prebish, 1984, Croakley 1994). Willy White a former gold medallist in the women's long jump explained her success in the Olympic Games this way: "*I was nervous, so I read the New*

*Testament. I read the verse about have no fear and I felt relaxed. Then I jumped further than I ever jumped before in my life"* (quoted in Life, 1984). Not all-religious athletes use their beliefs in this manner, but there is a tendency for some to call on their religion to help them successfully face challenges and uncertainty.

Even though religion and sports have exhibited some form of social co-existence in many societies, it has not been without social inhibitions in other societies.

In 393 A.D the Christian Emperor of the Greeks; Emperor Theodosius, banned the ancient Olympic Games claiming it was a pagan festival.

Among the Muslim and Hindu communities, religion control the extent to which women can participate in sports. This is manifested in international sporting events (e.g. the Olympics) Hindu and Islamic countries seldom have women athletes or women teams because women are not permitted to expose any parts of their bodies in public. Verma and Derby (1994) in their study of sports among the minority groups in Britain, came up with findings that Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists, do not participate in sports at all and the main reason is deeply rooted in their religious obligations. "It may not be that simply professing allegiance to a religion is important. It is reasonable to speculate that Muslim females who are strongly affected by their belief might well avoid sports as normally practised in Britain because they demand what for them would be immodest". Hence physical activities among Muslims and Hindus are nearly always sex segregated; men are not allowed to look at women in certain settings and women must cover their bodies in certain ways even as they exercise. Norms such as these are very strong among fundamentals in each Religion.

## **Conclusion**

Defined as what society does with its leisure time, religion's wise use for the practise of sports has had its beneficial effect not only on the human race's physical health and the promotion of modern skills, but also on its moral character. Edwards, (1973) argues that sports is a "quasi-religion" because it shares with religion certain characteristics and social functions.

Theologian Novak, M (1976) claims that sports are a form of "natural" religion because both are shaped by what he sees as an impulse for freedom, respect for ritual limits, a zest for symbolic meaning, and a longing for perfection. It is a type of godliness because they emerge out of the same quest for perfection in body, mind and spirit that

leads people to form their conceptions of God-conceptions that always embody the ideals of a particular group or society.

As described by Coakley (1994): "*Religious rituals are increasingly used in conjunction with sport participation, and there are a few large non denominational religious organisations that have been created for the sole purpose of attracting and converting athletes to Christian beliefs*".

Many critics would argue that in today's sports there is no direct link to religious beliefs or religious rituals. They are a means of entertainment rather than worship. They are not intended to transcend the material world; instead they embody the immediacy and values of the material world. They are not part of the sacred even though many people may define them as important part of life.

Despite all these sentiments, Sports became part and parcel of human social life. It is from these magical roots of primitive faith that our sport mainly grew. It owes its existence to the realm of religion. We talk of:

- Playing the game.
- Abide by the rules of the game
- Hitting below the belt.
- Being a spoilsport

Studies of religions and sports in diverse cultural settings would not only increase our understanding of other cultures but they would also increase our abilities to reflect on our own experiences and ask critical questions that enable us to see more clearly the ways in which the cultural practices of religions and sports are integrated into our lives.

Based on this observation, there is still a lot of evidence of a mutual interdependence between religion and sport. There are many religious values or practices present in sport, including ceremonies, rituals, and magic. These have remained a part of sport because it is commonly believed they are necessary for the continued institutionalisation of a sport or are somehow related to a particular sport.

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