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Sports and Christianity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives

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BOOK REVIEW

WATSON, N., & PARKER, A. (EDS.). (2013). *SPORTS AND CHRISTIANITY: HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES*. NEW YORK, NY: ROUTLEDGE. 299 PAGES.

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As a collegiate all-American, professional athlete and coach, and one who focused my doctoral research and current writing in the area of Christian formation, I was excited to read a volume that links sports and Christianity. Two themes frame the book: the history of debates surrounding sports-religion—especially Christian—relationship (Chapters 1–5), and contemporary philosophical debates surround sports-Christianity (Chapters 6–10). The contributors’ hope is that students, scholars, and lay readers alike may have access to a resource that provides both a “flavor and an overview” of previous and ongoing work. This article will provide brief chapter synopses followed by a few brief observations.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SPORT AND CHRISTIANITY

In Chapter 1, by way of a literature review, Watson and Parker chart the historical terrain pertaining to the intersection of sports and Christianity and highlight possible avenues for future research. Key topics addressed are Christian peace/performance and loss of real play, theology of play in sport, the rise of sports ministry, continued research and discussion in areas of muscular Christianity and sports ministry within church structures—as opposed to para-church structure—and women in sport. Watson and Parker posit numerous questions that many competitive or thoughtful Christian athletes and leaders might consider. For example:

- What constitutes Christian character in sports competition?
- What are the tensions surrounding notions of the modern sporting celebrity and idolatry?
- Is there theological justification for sporting celebrities to “sell the gospel” based on their fame and human abilities? (p. 31)

Watson and Parker find a distinct lack of quality empirical research, and—given the value of sport and religion in culture—there is an “urgent” need for more.

In Chapter 2, Pfitzner addresses Pauline metaphors, suggesting that the Apostle’s use of sport metaphor tells us much about the cultural context in which he lived (e.g., 1 Co 9:24–27; Gal 5:7; Phil 2:16). And while cautioning that one “can’t be sure of the exact referent or the extent of an image” (p. 90), Pfitzner argues that these agonistic metaphors and imagery are anchored in both social reality—Paul’s knowledge of contemporary athletics as events or via personal experience—and in a tradition of appropriate athletic metaphor at the time (p. 92).

In Chapters 3 and 4 the rise of sports in church and culture is discussed. McLeod examines sport and religion in England, namely during the Victorian era (1790–1914), which saw sport and religion develop significant tension with respect to issues such as “muscular Christianity,” time use in sport, professionalism, and sport as “new religion.” Hoffman addresses the rise of sport and evangelism, particularly in the latter nineteenth century United States and United Kingdom, when sport became noticeably woven into the very fabric of religious life. Hoffman presents the rationale for the change from sport as “refreshment” to an evangelical tool and also addresses Christians wining via questionable means (noting legendary coaches John Heisman and Amos Stagg), sports as an evangelical tool, for example.

Pertaining to the historical theme, in Chapter 5, Higgs suggests that one way to analyze sport-religion development is to study who sportsmen are, “what they represent and how their identities both create and reflect particular cultural values” (p. 4). Higgs accomplishes this focus by discussing the stereotype and archetype of the sportsman in order to examine their roles in modern-day American sports, the Greek ideals and the quest for excellence, and the pattern in modern American sports running the gamut of “Winning is not the most important thing but the only thing” (according to Red Sanders, p. 155), to it is “not that you won or lost—but how you played the Game” (according to Rice, p. 155). Then, the author addresses muscular Christianity in the stadium with reference to issues such as public praying and sky-ward finger pointing before concluding with focus on sport advertising as “true religion.”

CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES

In Chapter 6, Watson aims to initiate further discussion on special Olympics and the disabled—both physical and intellectual—in sports and what light these foci shed on sports with respect to Christian theology. Namely, this consideration exposes to some degree the extent to which commercialized sport is embedded in the fabric of social life and how the same

represents a cultural idolatry (revealed in its normative and often questionable values), or what he calls a metaphoric “Tower of Babel”. A revealing discussion ensues on how modern sport has created a culture where sport is religion—providing significance, self-worth, and identity for many—and where self-promotion and pride are actually seen as virtues (p. 175).

In Chapter 7, Trothen explores values underpinning the assessment of what is acceptable enhancement in sports. She conducts this exploration by couching her analysis as a normative discussion from a postmodern feminist theological perspective. She particularly focuses on enhancement debates with respect to visibility of differences which she claims leads to a greater diversity recognition and a decrease in the dominant embodiment categories—a decrease in the tendency to marginalize.

In a virtue-centered approach, Goodson, in Chapter 8, explores philosophical arguments regarding the use of anabolic steroids in Major League Baseball and concludes that morally we have to say that it is unjustifiable. He discusses the notions that team magnanimity is greater than individual magnanimity, internal good in sports is greater than the external good (p. 231), and friendship in sport is greater than . . . (p. 238).

Lixey deals with the issue of integrity and character in Chapter 9, where, in a climate of moral decay, sports is seen as a venue to promote those positive values and others. He muses from a Catholic perspective calling for renewed focus by laity and others to view and use sport as character development. A significant focal point is that a sports educator is more mentor or pastor than neutral. Other topics include elements of sport such as play, competition, and asceticism.

Lastly, in Chapter 10, Kretchmar examines humility and sport. Sport and spirituality are potential sites of both humility and pride. They force us to confront and reconcile opposites, e.g., confidence and security, all the while exhibiting dependency and vulnerability. Humility in sport comprises of two groupings of humility: H1 (apprenticeship or needing others) and H2 (Gratitude and receiving). Humility in sport includes humility: of place (knowing one’s place in the sport), of submission to authorities, of patience (greatness is not easily attained), and of identity (one’s role development in the sport). He asks if sport—as we know it today—is viable for cultivation of spiritual humility or a “pedagogy” for a healthy version of pride. Summarizing the chapter, one notion is the compatibility of humility and sport in “confident humility.”

COMMENTS

Minimally, the volume as a whole can lead those of us involved in athletics and sports leadership to reflect on significant issues pertaining to sport, competition, play and the integration of our Christian faith in contrast to

presuming the status quo or, by lack of assessment, perpetuating any incongruences of our faith in sport. Of much value is Watson and Parker's review of literature, highlighting of seminal works, and suggestions of key questions—a must for those interested in sports and religion/Christianity and its implications.

Discussion of Pauline metaphors, by Pfitzner, also was especially intriguing. It left me wishing that the chapter had been longer. This is where the “rubber meets the road” or the “sneakers hit the court” for coaches and athletes in many Christian traditions. Pfitzner addressed the intersection of our faith and sport guided by Scripture properly contextualized.

Chapters 3 and 4 gave historical context for our current state of sport and Christianity, nudging the reader to consider what is consistent with or ought to be augmented in our core beliefs and commensurate actions in sport as Christians. Along those lines I saw chapter 6 as an excellent juxtaposing of disabled athletes with able-bodied athletes to expose unhealthy views of competition and sport as well as our common denominator as God's creatures. As an athlete and coach, over years of time I have been attuned to an unspoken lesson from those less fortunate physically—our physical victories are not the essence of life, but rather they are our spiritual victories. This sentiment is captured by the statement: “the saving power of God is made manifest and perfected in weakness or the lack of ability . . . a strength that comes through weakness . . .” (p. 183).

While on the whole I found the book engaging, from a practical perspective it falls short in that it failed to reach one of its stated goals: to reach students, scholars, and *lay* readers alike. Though there are some valuable discussions to cause us to pause and reflect within our sport-Christianity worldview, I consider portions of this volume as “un-accessible” to the lay coach/leader or student/athlete—in particular, Chapter 7 and portions of Chapters 5 and 10). Perhaps this arises from a disconnect of sorts: the contributors are established academics in the sport-Christianity field, though none, save one, according to the biographies, seems to have had a significant level of personal athletic experience pertaining to the topics they address.

In Chapter 5, Higgs discusses muscular Christianity and intimates that it is hypocritical to have public displays by Christians “dancing” in the end zone, “praying between plays,” “pointing fingers” (up to heaven), for example, as obviated by Matthew 6:5 (p. 157). This concept stemmed a resonating question—Is not our Godward focus, public or private, wholly appropriate and accepted by God (1 Peter 4:11; 1 Cor. 10:31)? Many evidences today suggest that our culture has become so publicly anti-Christian that it now seems to be the accepted standard to shun references to God when for centuries in western cultures acknowledging God was the norm in public and private life. New Testament Stephen publicly proclaimed the “Good News” and prayed before his executioners (Acts 6:55–58); a businesswoman interviewed in public media acknowledges God's hand in a success; and an

athlete publicly gives credit to God for his or her gifts or success. Is authenticity subject to political correctness?

Chapter 7 contains some areas of concern from a purportedly sports-Christianity context. While space precludes a more lengthy discussion, here are a few issues of concern. First, a post-modern, feminist theology, citing minimally deistic views (p. 212) and even those more pantheistic in nature (pp. 213–214), seems to be a worldview out of joint with the focus of this book intended to reach the Christian lay coach, teacher, athlete, etc., and particularly with respect to issues such as evangelism in sport, witnessing, character development, etc. In a postmodern world denying meta-narratives, there would be no absolute truth on which to base good news of reconciliation for sinners let alone what constitutes Christian character in sport, as some of the authors have addressed.

Secondly, Trothen errs in making a false dichotomy of false dichotomies (p. 214). Why does she link sacred-profane with immanent-transcendent? To the contrary, it is reasonable Scripturally to suggest there is no separation of sacred and secular while in no way implying there are no immanent-transcendent relations between God and his creation. Scripture clearly states that God is both transcendent and immanent and that we are his relational creation (Gen 1:1; Act 14:15; Job 12:10; Heb 1:3; Eph 4:6). To cloud that Creator-creation dichotomy is suspect.

Lastly, while I appreciate Trothen's suggestions that we should not try to equalize differences from an entitlement view and that difference is "necessary and desired in sport" (p. 310), sameness, nonetheless, seems to be the standard for her. Does Trothen's ideology support reducing dominant groups, characteristics, and skills to the lowest common denominator so all can participate? If so, do we also have this dilemma in academia where it is acceptable for genetic advantages or hard work and persistence in doctoral work, for example, to propel students ahead of their peers? I would posit a "No." Should these academically advantaged ones be hampered so that others can catch up? Again, "No" would be my answer.. In the same way, sports is comprised of inequity almost by definition, wherein athletes strive to be the best they can be, partly measured against personal best, opponents' abilities, and tradition of the sport.

Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book and recommend it for students in sports leadership as well as to those wanting to be well-versed in the history and substantive ethical and biblical issues arising in the sport-Christianity dyad. However, some portions may seem esoteric to the lay reader. May God be honored in all we do on or off the venue of competition.

Steve Clark was an All-American and national finalist tennis player at the University of California, Davis. He played professionally and has coached collegiately for 25 years where his players were ranked as high 5 in the NCAA

and 3 in the world on the professional tour. He is currently the Head Men's Tennis coach at Eastern Washington University in Cheney, Washington. His doctoral work was a quantitative study on Protestant Evangelical Christian fathers and their intentional involvement in spiritual formation of their children. Steve holds an master's degree in Christian Apologetics, an master's in education, and degrees in philosophy and economics. He has taught philosophy, apologetics, systematic theology and educational foundations courses. Among numerous articles he has published, the latest are in the forthcoming *Encyclopedia of Christian Education*, namely: "Impact of Legal Issues on Homeschooling in Christian Education" and "Theology of Fathering; and Confession: Christian Practice and Christian Education."