Sport, Spirituality and Religion: Muscular Christianity in the Modern Age

An overview of the key features of the ways in which the relationship between sport and religion has developed during and since the nineteenth century. In Victorian Britain, long-standing religious values began to permeate and underpin sporting endeavour but these have subsequently been modified in various ways.

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Over the past 30–40 years there has been a steady growth in the academic literature concerning the relationship between sport and religion. This article aims to map out the key features of this relationship focusing specifically on developments in the UK both during and since the Victorian period. We begin by addressing the formative and innovative role which the English public schools and the Protestant church in Britain played in the growth of sport. Our discussion locates these developments against a wider cultural backdrop of nineteenth-century social change. The subsequent decline of the relationship between sport and the Protestant church in the UK during the twentieth century is acknowledged, but it is also argued that there are now signs of church growth and specifically sports ministry as a means of outreach, especially amongst young people. Accordingly, the final section of the article outlines how sports ministry workers may be seen to be re-engaging professionally in both church and non-church settings.[1]

Sport and Victorian Values

During the mid-nineteenth 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.[2] This transformation, it is argued, primarily took place through the work of Thomas Arnold, head teacher of Rugby School between 1828–41. Arnold's appointment at Rugby came at a time when wider criticisms prevailed of unruliness and disorder in the public schools; evils which he resolved to remedy. Central to Arnold's reforms were his religious beliefs and his desire to transform his young charges into 'good Christian gentlemen'.

During the mid-nineteenth century Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes, a pupil of Arnold's, became key figures in the relationship between sport and religion. Perhaps most notable in this respect was Hughes's 1857 book *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. The sense of high moral value and manly Christian endeavour embedded in the storyline 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 root a range of ethical concerns prevalent at that 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, in time, 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, cooperation, self-control, self-sacrifice, endurance, courage, temperance and esprit de corps (teamwork; a shared spirit of dedication to a cause). These generic values are clearly articulated as underpinning features of the Olympic Games themselves.

It is also important to locate the emergence of muscular Christianity against a broader social and cultural backdrop. The rapid onset of industrialisation in nineteenth-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-class folk, a movement which Holt has referred to as 'rational recreation'.[3] Rational recreation comprised the will of the social elite to reform society by redirecting 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 nineteenth century it was not uncommon for clergy 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 exercise, thereby aiding health and productivity.

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Sport and the Church: A New Era?

Given the class tensions surrounding sporting and other popular cultural pastimes during the Victorian period, how then, we might ask, was the relationship between the Protestant church and sport configured? From the 1850s onwards, sports grew in popularity in Britain and, as a consequence, the church came to recognise more readily the value of such pursuits both in terms of their social status and religious significance.[4] Indeed, it is clear that from the mid-nineteenth century churches actively began to explore connections with sport. From this time on, for example, the Anglican Church appears to have encouraged sporting links primarily out of a desire to eradicate the strong sense of 'puritanism' permeating its orbits and the resultant alienation of 'ordinary folk'. The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed a spectacular explosion of sport. By 1900 half a million or more played regularly in leagues.[5] Church sports teams began to spring up all over Britain, although they were much more common among liberal than among evangelical churches.[6]

The inclusion of sport as a part of church life 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 occasional games. Such innovation was not without its doubters. But church sporting provision was more complex than simply the setting up of football teams or the organisation of leisure pursuits. Evident also was the formal establishment of libraries, chess, billiard, tennis and cycling clubs and, specifically for females, rounders, table tennis and hockey alongside gymnastics and callisthenics.[7] 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.[8]

Notwithstanding the increased level of tolerance demonstrated by liberal in comparison to evangelical churches, from 1850 onwards Protestantism in Britain had, at the very least, begun to accept sport as a legitimate lifestyle pursuit. To this end, it can be argued that sport added to a broader secularisation of the church around this time. Needless to say, there were on-going debates and tensions about the role of sporting activity in church life, these included anxieties over the kinds of moral values that sport promoted and whether these were commensurate with Scripture, and the allocation of time to sport amidst the dissolution of strict sabbatarianism. Church leaders addressed these tensions in various ways but what seems apparent is that, irrespective of the underlying motive for the increased acquaintance of the church and sport, accompanying this was a much more widespread concern for the health of the nation which served to shore up the general acceptance of sport as a popular cultural pastime.

Sport and Protestantism post-1945

As the relationship between sport and the Protestant church grew stronger, muscular Christianity appeared in new and innovative guises. For example, 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. The Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) was founded in 1954, subsequently flourishing into a notable high school and coaches' ministry., and Athletes in Action (AIA) was founded in 1966. As the number of evangelical Christians in US professional sport began to increase, so too did opportunities for sports chaplaincy.[9]

Alongside the blossoming of sports chaplaincy came a redefinition of sports ministry in the life of American churches via increasing investment in resources and full-time sports ministers. Indeed, modern-day iterations of the sport-religion relationship seem a far cry from their muscular Christian roots.

Whilst not as dramatic as in the US, sports ministry has also flourished significantly in the UK. During the post-1950s period the voluntary municipal and commercial provision of sport grew in Britain but regular attendances at church progressively reduced, especially among young people. The secularisation of sport was even more marked than the displacement of church from education and youth work. So much so that by the 1980s many congregations had no involvement in what was the most popular leisure choice for young people, and their youth went elsewhere to play sport. However, by this time moves were afoot to re-establish the relationship between sport and the church in Britain. In the mid-1970s, for example, a delegation from the UK were invited to attend a sports ministry conference in the USA. On their return they decided to set up a Christian ministry for sport in the UK culminating in 1975 with the launch of the Christian Sportsmen's Outreach. Over the next five years attempts were made to identify Christians in professional sport. Conferences were held at Bisham Abbey (1976) and Crystal Palace (1977). By 1980 the movement had been renamed

Notes

1. The present article is based on a lengthier and more detailed discussion on these matters; see A Parker and J Stuart Weir, 'Sport, spirituality and religion: From muscular Christianity to Modern-day Ministry', *Theology* (forthcoming, 2012).

2. See JA Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School* (London: Frank Cass, 1981).

3. R Holt, *Sport and the British* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

4. See H McLeod, 'Thews and Sinews'; and 'Sport and the English Sunday School, 1869–1939', in S Orchard and JHY Briggs (eds), *The Sunday School Movement: Studies in the growth and decline of Sunday Schools*, (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), pp. 109–23.

5. Holt, *Sport*.

6. P Scott, 'Cricket and the religious world of the Victorian Period', *The Church Quarterly* 3 (1970), pp. 134–44. It has been estimated that in Birmingham in the years 1871–80 20% of the total number of cricket clubs and just under 25% of the association football clubs had connections with religious organisations.

'Christians in Sport' and registered as a charity. In 1984 Andrew Wingfield Digby was appointed to a salaried position as Director of this growing organisation and a Christians in Sport office was established in Oxford.

Today the spectrum of the Christian community's interface with sport in the UK is vast, with around 35 different Christian organisations in the UK alone. There is sports competition – whether in one of the host of local inter church football leagues or the inter-diocesan *Church Times* cricket cup. There are ministries focused on specific sporting activities such as Christian Surfers UK or Logos Golf Ministries. Ambassadors in Sport, Kick London and Sports Pursuits offer sports coaching, delivered by highly qualified Christian coaches. Higher Sports provides simple to use coaching programmes with spiritual application to introduce children to football, rugby or cricket. SCORE specialises in promoting sports chaplaincy, whether by supporting the network of 100+ chaplains to sports such as professional football, rugby, cricket and horse racing, or by offering chaplaincy to an event like the 2010 Women's Rugby World Cup. Organisations like Youth for Christ and Operation Mobilisation have dedicated sports staff. Increasingly UK sports ministries are taking their expertise abroad to serve and develop emerging sports ministry around the world. This is evident in the work of the Kings Foundation's in Botswana, Christians in Sport's training of young leaders in India and Uganda, Kick London and Ambassadors in Sport providing coach education in South Africa or Ukraine, and Verite Sport's partnerships with women's football in Togo and basketball in Kazakhstan. While some of this work might be seen to be following in the footsteps of the muscular Christian ethos, the majority of such projects are motivated by a broader desire to evangelise sport and/or to evangelise the world through sport.

A particularly significant development, in recent years, has been the increasing recognition of the potential of major sporting events as evangelistic opportunities. While the Church has traditionally been suspicious of major sports events it has now come to see these as an opportunity for witness and service. Mega-event ministry (as we would recognise it today) effectively began in 1988, at the summer Olympics in Seoul, Korea and at the winter Games in Calgary, Canada. In the interim, mega-event strategy has evolved considerably. The initial focus was on the competitors themselves, along with those who came to watch the event live. In time the vision spread to encouraging the local church to use the interest generated in major events in their vicinity as a bridge to minister to the wider public. As the media revolution took hold, it became clear that approaches aimed at reaching people in the Olympic or World Cup host country could equally be applied to any city or country, when and where the event was given a significant media profile.

Conclusions

Our intention has been to present an overview of the way in which the relationship between sport and the Protestant church has developed over the past 150 years.[10] Victorian Britain played host to the emergence of the sport-religion relationship in Britain, and, as a consequence, long-standing religious values began to permeate and underpin sporting endeavour both at the grassroots and the elite level. A series of broader social conditions and circumstances can also be seen to have nurtured the emergence of this relationship, one of which was a middle and upper class preoccupation with the social habits and pastimes of the industrialised working classes. We have subsequently highlighted how, over time, the ideological sporting values formulated during this period have been modified in various ways.

Given all of the above, how, we might ask, should we begin to think about future work in this area? How might the relationship between the church and sport develop? What is its potential in terms of broader notions of outreach and mission? For sure, there is evidence to suggest that, in the UK at least, the vestiges of evangelical negativism towards sport remains. On the other hand, sport, as a specific area of ministry, has witnessed something of a resurgence in the UK in recent years and is now an established field of outreach both within church and para-church organisations and within secular settings. Likewise, those involved in sports ministry at a national level continue to forge forward in relation to establishing a presence in elite sport and within the context of mega-events; this is presently evidenced in and through the operationalisation of the 'More than Gold' strategy, the interdenominational organisation coordinating the Christian community's involvement with the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games in London.[11]

On a broader scale modern-day sports ministry also has a host of practical matters with which to deal. The culture of twenty-first century secular sport is such that moral and ethical issues feature large amidst the day-to-day processes of participation, spectatorship and media commentary, all of which have the potential to manifest themselves, to some degree or another, within the context of church-based sports programmes. Likewise, nowadays Sunday church attendance often competes for the attentions of those wishing to play sport in secular circles; youth football's move to Sunday mornings in the 1990s being a prime example of how such tensions and dilemmas may arise. Nevertheless, the popularity of sport (especially as an aspect of youth culture) continues to grow and, in this sense, one of the greatest challenges facing sports ministry workers is to provide a quality of service in this area which competes with and surpasses all that the secular world can offer. Indeed, it is to keep pace with secular sporting provision, whilst distancing itself from the moral dissonance which it often promotes, that is arguably the most pressing challenge for modern-day sports ministry.

See T Mason, *Association Football and English Society 1863–1915*.

7. See N Wigglesworth, *The Evolution of English Sport* (London: Frank Cass, 1996); J Lowerson, 'Sport and the Victorian Sunday: The beginnings of Middle-class apostasy', *British Journal of Sports History* 1.2 (1984).

8. See McLeod, 'Thews and Sinews'.

9. With the support of the commissioner of Major League Baseball, Bowie Kuhn, in 1974 Baseball Chapel was established in order to provide a chapel programme for all major league baseball teams with a minor league programme following in 1978. Of course, such progress has not gone without criticism. See, e.g., See T Mason, *Association Football and English Society 1863–1915*.

10. For a critique and comparison of the varying approaches to sport by the Protestant and the Roman Catholic church see: S.J. Hoffman, Sport and Religion, and T Ladd & JA Mathisen, *Muscular Christianity: Evangelical Protestants and the Development of American Sports* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999).

11. See: www.morethangold.org.uk. For more information on the network of sports ministry organisations within the UK see: www.uksportsministries.org. For more on UK sports chaplaincy see: www.scorechaplaincy.org.uk/CMSPro/60/index.php