

THE PARALLEL OF MODERN-DAY SPORT TO RELIGION:
AN ANALYSIS OF HOW SOCIETY HAS TRANSFORMED SPORT INTO A
SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

BY

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ABSTRACT

The Parallel of Modern-Day Sport to Religion:

An analysis of how society has transformed sport into a spiritual practice

Thesis under the direction of Gary Miller, Ph.D., Associate Professor of HES

Sport has become a growing phenomenon in our society and is one of the most prominent customs of prevalent culture throughout the world. Religion, on the other hand, has always been very prevalent throughout the world and has been the foundation of the world. We as a society have shaped sports to be a form of religious devotion. The manifestations of traditional religion that are seen in the chapel are comparable to those seen in the stadium. The extreme fandom that we see as well as the rituals and formal procedures that are performed before, during and after sporting events resemble those performed for religious purposes. This paper takes an in-depth look into some of the research into the connection between sport and religion as it takes the definition of religion and then compares it with sport.

INTRODUCTION

In the mid-nineteenth century German philosopher Karl Marx in his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* stated that "Religion is the opiate of the masses." Now 150 years later in the start of the 21st century can it be posited that "Sport is the opiate of the masses?" This analogy has been asserted by many sociologists as well as psychologists today. Opiates are physically addicting drugs but also used in the field of medicine to ease suffering and has even helped to save many lives. Opium is the most effective drug in relieving pain, especially severe and excruciating pain. Although sport is not physically addicting, it can be psychologically addicting. Sport has become like an obsession in our society, therefore to proclaim that sport is an opiate would not be implausible. Sport is capable of reducing the stress of everyday life for the fan by moving their attention from the pressures and struggles of daily life into the exhilaration and enjoyment of the game. Nevertheless, in recent years several scholars have compared sport to religion believing that sport has become a form of religious devotion. Worship, prayer, fellowship with others, ceremonies and rituals are all expressions of religion; however we see all of these same types of expressions performed toward sport throughout the world. It should come as no surprise that the spirit or excitement, the activities and rituals that you see in sport today parallels that of religion. This paper will evaluate and explore the parallel between religion and sport from a societal perspective and how many of the manifestations of traditional religion are now seen in sport. This paper is not solely about religion but it will explore the religious nature of sport. This

paper will also explore the variety of definitions of the term religion as well as sport, the connections between sport and religion, and sport fandom.

People do not often think about religion when talking about sport. These two systems have never been linked to one another as much as they have in recent years. Normally, one would not connect sport which is fun, competitive, intense, and in some instances violent in nature, to that of religion, which in contrast is often viewed as somber, reverent, and sacred in nature. Not many would associate the attendance at church or a synagogue in traditional religion with one's attendance in the gymnasium or arena in sport. Many would not link the rituals performed in religion with rituals performed in sport, however "there are numerous examples of identity between religion and sport rituals in the public sphere."¹ One can go on and on about the comparisons between both systems. This thinking is not just true of Americans but for our worldly society, just consider European and South American soccer or as they call it "futbol" as well as baseball in the Caribbean islands.

Indeed if people decided to ponder these two subjects, they would often contemplate *religion in sport*. A prime example of that would be to consider *religion in sport* as it pertains to the actions of Tim Tebow, a former quarterback in the National Football League (NFL). Tebow, a proclaimed Christian, gained notoriety with his symbolic allegiance to his faith by the customary Christian act of kneeling on the field following any score made by his team to exhibit praise, thanks, and reverence to his given belief. Other proclaimed Christian athletes such as Tebow were not different in

¹ Shirl Hoffman, *Sport and Religion* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1992), 49.

their actions to share their faith in the public eye, believing that their faith is the driving force behind their success. Furthermore, many athletes use their faith or religion to support their athletic endeavors. Ray Lewis, a former NFL linebacker, was another athlete to openly express his devotion of faith on the field as a testimony for using God-given talents. Lewis went so far as to run across the field after winning the Super Bowl in 2013 with a shirt that displayed the bible verse “Psalm 93.” These are just a few examples of how many may interpret these two systems being interconnected. It is, however, a controversial topic that many feel should be kept to themselves, but this is certainly a topic for another time.

Shirl Hoffman, author of *Sport and Religion*, compared sport to religion versus sport for entertainment. He stated that:

Sport is not merely fun and games, not merely diversions, not merely an entertainment. A ballpark is not a temple, but it isn't a fun house either. A baseball game is not entertainment, and a ballplayer is considerably more than a paid performer. No one can explain the passion, commitment, discipline and dedication involved in sport by evasions like these. Sport is more like religion than like entertainment. Believers in sport do not go to sporting events to be entertained; to plays and dramas, maybe, but not to sport. Sport is far more serious than the dramatic arts, much closer to primal symbols, metaphors, and acts, much more ancient and more frightening. Sport is a mystery of youth and aging, perfect action and decay, fortune and misfortune, strategy and contingency. Sport is rituals concerning human survival on this planet: liturgical enactments of animal perfection and the struggles of the human spirit to prevail. If sport was entertainment, why should we care? It is far more than that. So when we see them abused, our natural response is the rise of vomit in the throat.²

If sport was mere entertainment we would not see fans burning their favorite player's jersey after leaving their favorite team, we would not see fans fighting and murdering one

² Hoffman, *Sport and Religion*, 38.

another just because they love different teams, we would not see the start of wars because of a soccer match, we would not see an entire city gain hope after a natural disaster because their team won the Super Bowl, and we certainly would not see thousands of people committing suicide because of their team. The outcome of games does affect fans. They care and if one looks at the difference between entertainment and involvement of spirit, it is without question apparent. This is why there are 24 hours of sport coverage all over the television every single day. Therefore, we as a human society have shaped sport to be a form of religious devotion. The religious elements that are seen in religion are also found within sport. “To have a religion, you need to have a way to exhilarate the human body, and desire, and will, and the sense of beauty, and a sense of oneness with the universe and other humans. You need chants and songs, the rhythm of bodies in unison, the indescribable feeling of many who together “will one thing” as if they were members of a single body. All these things you have in sport.”³

Unfortunately, because this idea has only been discussed and debated as of recently, it is still difficult to express what it is that gives sport its spirit and power. As we move forward, we must unpack what religion really is and the characteristics of it as well as sport.

³ Hoffman, *Sport and Religion*, 41.

WHAT IS RELIGION?

When discussing this topic, as well as attempting to define the role of religion, one must determine an appropriate definition of the term religion. In order to compare sport to religion, it relies on one's definition of the term. Religion is extremely difficult to define although scholars and theologians constantly attempt to define and describe it. In addition, the arguments, discussions and definitions for the term are endless. As a result, scholars and theologians have yet to agree upon one universal definition of religion. However, religion cannot be defined except by the characteristics by which are found wherever religion itself is found.⁴ Nevertheless, the one aspect of religion that must be agreed upon, and is required to remotely be considered as religion, is that it is a belief system held by a group of people who publicly share that religion. Religion is more than the idea of gods or spirits, and consequently cannot be defined exclusively in relation to these. For example, the religion of Buddhism recognizes no god. It is a religion that depends not on a god or superior power but only oneself. "Instead of praying, in the ordinary sense of the term, instead of turning towards a superior being and imploring his assistance, he relies upon himself and meditates."⁵ In Buddhism though, one must know the good doctrine or the four holy truths and put it into practice. That is how Buddhism is a religion, it admits the existence of sacred things such as those four noble truths and the practices derived from them. Emile Durkheim, in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* asserts that "there can be no religion except where there are prayers, sacrifices, propitiatory rites, etc. Thus we have a very simple criterium which

⁴ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York: Collier Books, 1965), 38.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

permits us to distinguish that which is religious from that which is not.” However, we see here with this great religion of Buddhism, where invocations, propitiations, sacrifices and prayers properly so-called are far from holding a preponderating place, and which consequently do not present that distinctive sign by which some claim to recognize those manifestations which are properly called religious. This makes for one inexact determination of what can be religion and what cannot. Nevertheless, divinity is not a characteristic that determines a religion. The following are a few characteristics that most religions will encompass:

1. Interaction with the supernatural.⁶
2. A diagnosis of something essentially wrong with the human condition, and a prescription for salvation or liberation from it.⁷
3. Regular, repeated behavior (rituals).⁸
4. Community practice.⁹

A religion must not cover each one of these characteristics but should include a few to be categorized as a religion. There are certainly more characteristics that can be added but these are just a few of the main features. Before proceeding any further though, we should take a look at a variety of definitions that have been given to this inconclusive term “religion” throughout the past few centuries.

⁶ Luke Muehlhauser, “Intro to religion: What is religion?,” *Common Sense Atheism*, <http://commonsenseatheism.com/>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

- “Religion originates in an attempt to represent and order beliefs, feelings, imaginings and actions that arise in response to direct experience of the sacred and the spiritual. As this attempt expands in its formulation and elaboration, it becomes a process that creates meaning for itself on a sustaining basis, in terms of both its originating experiences and its own continuing responses” – Paul Connelly¹⁰
- “A unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them” – Emile Durkheim¹¹
- “Religion can be characterized as a system that explains the world and helps to get the better of life” – Alois Koch SJ¹²
- “Religion is the external practice of an internal belief” – Treadwell Lewis
- “Religion is that system of activities and beliefs directed toward that which is perceived to be of sacred value and transforming power” – James Livingston¹³
- “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions” – Thomas Luckmann¹⁴
- “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions” – Karl Marx¹⁵

¹⁰ Various definitions of Religion, “*Definitions of religion*,” <http://web.pdx.edu/>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

- “A set of beliefs, practices, and institutions which men have evolved in various societies, as far as they can be understood, as responses to those aspects of their life and situation which as believed not in the empirical-instrumental sense to be rationally understandable and /or controllable, and to which they attach a significance which includes some kind of reference to the relevant actions and events to man’s conception of the existence of the “supernatural” order which is conceived and felt to have a fundamental bearing on man’s position in the universe and the values which give meaning to his fate as an individual and his relations to his fellows” – Talcott Parsons¹⁶
- “Is the determination of human life by the sentiment of a bond uniting the human mind to that mysterious mind whose domination of the world and itself it recognizes, and to whom it delights in feeling itself united?” – M. Reville¹⁷
- “A means toward ultimate transformation” – Frederick Streng¹⁸
- “The state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of meaning and of our life” – Paul Tillich¹⁹
- “The possession of a common set of ideas, rituals, and symbols can supply an overarching sense of unity in a society riddled with conflicts” – R.M. Williams²⁰

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Various definitions of Religion, “*Definitions of religion*,” <http://web.pdx.edu/>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

These are just a few of the myriad definitions that this term has established. The definition here by Emile Durkheim is one that is more radically sociological and is grasped as a “social fact.”

BELIEFS

In this chapter it is the nature of religion as a whole that we seek to express, therefore we look to proceed as if it were a sort of indivisible entity but, in reality, religion is made up of parts. Religion is a more or less complex system of legends, beliefs, rites and ceremonies. Now a whole cannot be defined except in relation to its parts.²¹ Therefore we must define religion relative to its elements that are the basis of it. The first elementary notion we must manage is unquestionably the category of beliefs. “Beliefs are states of opinion which, whether simple or complex, presuppose a classification of all the things, real and ideal, of which men think.”²² Basically, beliefs are convictions that things held in the mind are true. They form the basis of behavior and are the foundations of our attitude. Understanding beliefs and how profound they are will aid to understand the prejudices, discrimination, aggressive behaviors and group decision-making that occur in society.²³

THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE

As Durkheim states in *Elementary forms of Religious Life*, these beliefs can be divided by two distinct terms: the sacred and the profane. “Religious beliefs are the representations which express the nature of sacred things and the relations which they

²¹ Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 51.

²² *Ibid.*, 52.

²³ Natalia D. Smoak, *Beliefs* (online; Encyclopedia of social psychology, 2007), in Gale Virtual Reference Library, <http://go.galegroup.com/go.libproxy.wfubmc.edu/>.

sustain, either with each other or with profane things.”²⁴ Sacred, which is derived from the Latin word “sacer,” denotes that which is Holy. The sacred constitutes phenomena which are set apart, revered, and distinguished from all other phenomena that constitute the profane or the mundane. For example, in Christianity it can be considered that the Cross, the Bible and Angels are sacred. In its Catholic form the Virgin, the Saints, holy water, and the rosary are recognized as sacred. In contrast, the profane is the absolute distinction of the sacred. “The sacred thing is *par excellence* that which the profane should not touch, and cannot touch with impunity.”²⁵ Consequently, the profane is anything within a society that is not sacred. “Each homogeneous group of sacred things, or even each sacred thing of some importance, constitutes a centre of organization about which gravitate a group of beliefs and rites, or a particular cult; there is no religion, howsoever unified it may be, which does not recognize a plurality of sacred things.”²⁶

rites and rituals

This is where we touch upon another elementary notion of rites. “There are beliefs that are clearly manifested only through the rites which express them; therefore these two parts of our analysis cannot fail to overlap.”²⁷ According to Durkheim, rites are simply the rules of conduct which prescribe how a man should comport himself in the presence of these sacred objects. This may include jumping, whirling, dancing, crying, singing, etc. It is the conceptions and beliefs which are considered as the essential elements of religion. As for the rites, from this point of view they appear to be only an

²⁴ Ibid., 56.

²⁵ Ibid., 55.

²⁶ Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 56.

²⁷ Ibid., 121.

external translation, contingent and material, of these internal states which alone pass as having any intrinsic value.²⁸ Rites and rituals are similar in meaning, however a rite designates one single ritual act; ritual a series of rites. Robert Boccock in *Ritual in Industrial Society* provides us with a basic definition of a ritual: the symbolic use of bodily movement and gesture in a social situation to express and articulate meaning. It can also be simply said that rituals are sets of actions that are repeatedly performed as a sign of worship and to commemorate events or beliefs. Some rituals may include attending Sunday church service, worshipping, praying five times a day for Muslims, celebrating Hanukkah for Judaism, etc. When a certain number of sacred things sustain relations of coordination or subordination with each other in such a way as to form a system having a certain unity, but which is not comprised within any other system of the same sort, the totality of these beliefs and their corresponding rites and rituals constitutes a religion.²⁹

In speaking with Treadwell Lewis, graduate of Robert Morris University, he theorizes that religion is:

The emphasis is really on the external practices not the belief itself. It is a focus on the external practices of groups of people as a result of their belief in some type of higher power. It is usually organized and practiced among individuals with similar beliefs. In a practical way, it is man searching or man reaching out (trying to connect with) to the spiritual. It often involves important texts and places of meeting. This is the focus on practices, traditions and customs. What people are doing...praying, chanting, meditation, behavioral changes, worship, group gatherings, going to church, giving to the poor, sacraments, etc.

²⁸ Ibid., 463.

²⁹ Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 56.

We must note once again that a religion is not necessarily contained within one sole and single idea, and does not progress from one unique principle, it is rather a whole made up of distinct and relatively individualized parts.

THE CHURCH

Wherever we observe the religious life, we find that it has a definite group as its foundation. This is where community comes into play. “A society whose members are united by the fact that they think in the same way in regard to the sacred world and translate these common ideas into common practices, is what is called a Church.”³⁰

Religious beliefs that are held individually are not received merely by all members of the group, however they are something that belongs to the group and which makes for unity. Individuals who have similar beliefs are united through the simple fact that they have a common faith. One will never find a single religion without a Church. Rather directed by priests or ministers or an official directing body, there will never be a religion void of a Church. As Emile Durkheim argues, religion is both a product and producer of social cohesion.

FOLK RELIGION AND CIVIL RELIGION

As we close this chapter we must touch briefly upon the ideas of folk religion and civil religion. Folk religion is a combination of shared moral principles and behavioral customs that emphasize the common religion of a people as it emerged out of the life of ‘the folk’...plus those religious ideas, values, symbols, ceremonies, and loyalties which

³⁰ Ibid., 59.

the overwhelming majority of the people of any state or nation hold in common.”³¹ It arises from one’s daily life experiences in order to provide social integration and the legitimation of values. The unusually practical character of the rituals and beliefs of the folk religion was noted by A.R. Eckardt in *The Surge of Piety in America*, it fosters individual security, it aids brotherhood, it contributes to social solidarity. In a word, religion is good because it is good for people....religion bears the stamp of social approval and the social interest bears the stamp of religious approval. “The power of this folk religion consists in the condition of positive relationships of the community and whose maintenance is the duty of the members of the society as a mystic life which binds all together.”³²

This idea of civil religion can be traced to the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s “The Social Contract.” He maintained the need for “social sentiments,” outside of organized religion, without which a man cannot be a good citizen or faithful subject. He simply believes that there is room for religious beliefs in other aspects of life. When referring to civil religion one is stating the cultural beliefs, practices, and symbols that relate a nation to the ultimate conditions of its existence. In the United States this is easily identified because of the systems that encompass the government, the displays of patriotism, and the efforts to combat basic social problems such as homelessness and hunger. These are just a few of the many symbols and rituals that provide a sense of cohesion and continuity for Americans. Civil religion, in short, symbolizes “oneness.”

³¹ Hoffman, *Sport and Religion*, 19.

³² *Ibid.*, 20.

WHAT IS SPORT?

Very briefly we must understand what it is meant by the term sport. As Howard Slusher posits in *Man, Sport, and Existence*, “Sport, for many individuals, is a cult that fulfills generalized and specific need gratifications. It represents a specific and externalized value system that inculcates its own form of good and evil, rewards and punishments, as well as a complete matrix of individualized normative outcomes. In a way it can be said that sport determines its own situation in the context of culture.”³³ Sport simply possesses a meaning of its own. When involving oneself in the act of sport, it will require time, effort and energy. It will express one’s individuality but, as one approaches the act internally, one is extremely social in their endeavors. Sport frees man, not from other activities such as work, but by it. “Sport is more than simply what one does in his leisure; it is more than an escape from everyday life; and certainly it is more than a mere socially desirable avenue for release of one’s aggressions.”³⁴

Sport is full of so many varying emotions, including devotion, care, respect, concern, sacrifice, work, suffering, despair, hope, stress, intimacy, joy, exhilaration, fear. It is more than just play; it is serious and throughout centuries it has evolved into a task of living. Therefore to conceive of sport as simply games, activities, or even a value is to say less than what it is. Sport is a place for these emotions which vary from happiness to grief and includes the pleasures of success and the afflictions of defeat, but they are nothing but what is involved in daily life. Sport has provided man with an “arena for living.” However, sport must be conceived in its own context, without a superimposed

³³ Howard Slusher, *Man, sport, and existence; a critical analysis* (Philadelphia: Henry Kimpton, 1967), 4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

value structure which means that sport has meaning for each person who engages in the specified activity. “Sport provides us with a potential form for meaning, authenticity, and reality—all leading to being-in-self. Thus, sport is more than a link with life, it is a vital aspect of existence, one which opens the self to the mystery of being.”³⁵

FOUR CHARACTERISTICS OF SPORT

Similarly to religion, because sport is nearly impossible to define, we have to define and describe it by its characteristics. The first characteristic that Howard Slusher identifies is *Contention of Interest*. This is commonly termed “competition.” This means that one has an interest that is contended by the opposition, which can be another man or even nature. The second characteristic dealing with sport is *Consistency of Role*. This means that one must have a consistent and structured pattern to achieve a certain outcome, therefore maintaining a consistency of role expectation. This characteristic carries with it the need for decision-making which divides into: (a) decisions made by the individual and (b) decisions made by the group. “The dilemma of individual decision-making is crucial to sport.”³⁶ *Utilization-Actualization* is the next characteristic, which is relevant to maximization of individual effort toward utilitarian ends. In sport, participants will participate and put forth as much effort as possible to achieve a certain outcome. Participants will engage in the activity with intent to better their ability. For example, many participants will have a strict workout regime to sharpen their skills. The last characteristic of sport that we must discuss in this section is *Variable Predictability*. This relates to the problem of variables and how it is impossible to program all the

³⁵ Slusher, *Man, sport, and existence; a critical analysis*, 8.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

chances that could occur in a specific game such as a tennis match. This eliminates all forms of dice games and card games from being considered as a sport. For example, one cannot enter into a football game with a mathematically determined factor of variable predictability.³⁷

Sport cannot be completely understood from a rational foundation, so to attach any absolute structure to the world of sport is to deny limitations to its known reality.³⁸ It can only best be described by its factors or traits. These may appear unconventional or perhaps even limiting when describing sport but as Howard Slusher advocates, “It provides a structure within which the reader can focus his attention.” Moreover, these are not the totality of elements that are found within sport but they are constructs that are located within that which is the *spirit of the concept of sport*.³⁹

³⁷ Slusher, *Man, sport, and existence; a critical analysis*, 48.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 218.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

CONNECTION BETWEEN SPORT AND RELIGION

Those with an extremely deep commitment to their religious faith may find the comparison between sport and religion as blasphemous. Sport shares many similarities to religion so the displays that are seen in religion are also seen in sport. As striking as it may be, it is not hard to see the numerous connections that exist between the two if the facts are examined. Michael Novak writes, “sport is religious in the sense that they are organized institutions, disciplines and liturgies and also in the sense that they teach religious qualities of heart and soul. In the most literal of ways, words like sacred, devotion, faith, ritual, immortality, and love, which figure prominently in the structure of belief in religion, are also among those found in the language of the national pastime.” Both deal with dedication, sacrifice, commitment, suffering, pain, festival, and celebration. It also has been regarded as a shaper and reinforcer of values, such as developing character, hard-work habits, perseverance, commitment and more. Catherine Albanese in *America, Religions and Religion*, grants sport status as a religion on grounds that it offers symbolic vehicles, which provide windows into a transcendent world and gives people a means by which to order their lives and search for meaning in the everyday world.⁴⁰ Sport has taken on properties of ritualistic behavior in a controlled environment in which strong emotion is visibly expressed. This is a social function that is normally attributed to religion, e.g., worship. “The aspect of sport that so invites a comparison with religion is the intense excitement and the spirit of community it

⁴⁰ Hoffman, *Sport and Religion*, 8.

generates.”⁴¹ It is not irrational to believe that the collective excitement, or as Emile Durkheim terms it “effervescence,” that is seen within sport is similar to religious ceremonies that take place. For many people, going to a stadium or ballpark is like attending church. Think about how the Olympics are constructed today, they begin and end with glorious ceremonies and rituals in massive stadiums. We can easily compare the Super Bowl to a religious festival as well. “There is a remarkable sense in which the Super Bowl functions as a major religious festival for American culture, for the event signals a convergence of sport and politics. Like festivals in ancient societies, which made no distinctions regarding the religious, political and sporting character of certain events, the Super Bowl succeeds in reuniting these now disparate dimensions of social life.”⁴² The Super Bowl displays majestic rituals such as the singing of the national anthem by a celebrity artist and the unfolding of the enormous American flag, which is followed by military jets howling across the air followed by the famous coin toss. The Super Bowl is, arguably, the most grandiose stage in all of sport. It is the holy day of professional sports, therefore anything having to do with the event is magnified. The community parties, the large feasts, and the felt-obligation to “be a part of it” are what have made Super Bowl Sunday a holy day.

For sport to be considered parallel to religion it must quite self-consciously attempt to be just that. It must present all the rituals, practices, myths, legends, shrines, and so forth that all traditional religions provide.⁴³ This aspect of sport being a form of

⁴¹ Ibid., 7.

⁴² Ibid., 13.

⁴³ Hoffman, *Sport and Religion*, 41.

religious devotion has seldom been discussed because, consequently, it is hard to express just what it is that gives sport its spirit and power. Nevertheless, sport and religion just have so many commonalities that, quite frankly, it is difficult to contend against the claim. Harry Edwards who is a former Sociology professor at the University of California once identified 13 areas where sport and religion connect in *Sociology of Sport* (1973):

- Sport has a body of formally stated beliefs, accepted on faith by great masses of people.
- Sport has its "saints" -- those departed souls who in their lives exemplified and made manifest the prescription of the dogma of the sport.
- Sport also has its ruling patriarchs, a prestigious group of coaches, managers, and sportsmen who exercise controlling influence over national sport organizations.
- Sport has its "gods" -- star and superstar athletes who, though powerless to alter their own situations, wield great influence and charisma over the masses of fans.
- Sport has its high councils, controlled or greatly influenced by patriarchs who make and interpret the rules of sport involvement.
- Sport has its scribes -- the hundreds of sport reporters, sport telecasters, and sport broadcasters whose primary duties are to record the ongoing history of sport and to disseminate its dogma.
- Sport has its "symbols of faith" -- trophies; game balls, the bats, gloves, baseballs, and so forth that 'won' this or that game; the clothing, shoes, headgear or socks of immortal personages of sports.

- Sport has its "seekers of the kingdom" its true believers, devotees, and converts.
- Sport has its shrines—the national halls of fame and thousands of trophy rooms and cases.
- Sport has its “houses of worship” spread across the land where millions congregate to bear witness to the manifestations of their faith.⁴⁴

Think about ballparks, stadiums and coliseums in sport in comparison to temples, sanctuaries, and chapels in religion. They are all houses of worship where believers come together in unison to celebrate their beliefs. These sport stadiums and arenas resemble those cathedrals and temples where followers gather to worship and pray for success. In both, there are many rituals that occur which are organized and structured. If one goes into any stadium or ballpark or any sporting event for that matter, they will notice the unity of handclapping, chants, encouragements and booing of the opponent. Attending a religious service one will also notice the unity of handclapping, chanting and singing of hymns. On the other hand, there are many rituals that are “spur of the moment” or unstructured such as someone suddenly shouting in tongues in a sanctuary or the outbursts of fans toward a referee or opponent. Nonetheless, these houses of worship have recently been termed as sacred space or ritual space. Sacred space can be identified as locations for formalized, repeatable symbolic performances or arenas for the performance of controlled, extraordinary patterns of action. One arena or “house of worship” that has strong significance in all of sport is the famous Madison Square Garden. Madison Square Garden can be compared to the Sistine Chapel in traditional

⁴⁴ Hoffman, *Sport and Religion*, 41.

religion as it is the most iconic sporting site in the world and has a rich and successful history. The stadium seats 20,000 and is filled to capacity on a nightly basis to its home teams, the New York Knicks and New York Rangers. Because of its rich history, Madison Square Garden is also the annual venue for the National Football League Draft, National Basketball Association Draft, Fortune 500 company conferences, graduations, NCAA tournaments, and even religious conferences. Madison Square Garden is also known for its dedicated New York fan-base that support their teams regardless of circumstances. Players marvel at the opportunity to play in the arena as do tourists who want to catch a game to see the sight of the historic arena and its devout fans. Just as certain temples and sanctuaries have strong religious significance so do stadiums and ballparks such as Madison Square Garden.

MORE THAN A GAME

For sport to be considered a parallel to religion it cannot discard any of the elements that religion presents. Religion is more than playing games and, on the other hand, sport, for many fans, also is more than just playing games. In addition, if in fact the religious aspect is found in sport then sport cannot simply be condensed to playing games too. There must be something deeper found. If this is the case then sport shares a transcendent euphoria that religion entails. Just as those who adhere to religious faith because it connects them to the “ultimate” as well as it bringing them into a new consciousness, sport also can provide the fan with a transcendent experience. For these devoted fans, being dedicated to something greater than themselves gives them a new feeling, a feeling that connects them to a higher level or the “ultimate.” We see this with

the many fans who attempt to get their ashes dumped on playing fields such as Yankee Stadium or the many fans wanting to be buried under these fields. Sport contains a transcendent quality that gives devoted fans meaning to their everyday life, giving them a greater identity, and allowing them to see their self in a more positive way. It can provide hope to one but also can deliver misery and despair upon one. Sport would not be correctly portrayed if the transcendent quality of sport was not mentioned.

The ritualistic behavior that we have been mentioning throughout this paper that we see in both sport and religion is another key reason for the comparison between the two. Rituals can be performed both publicly and privately. As mentioned before, in traditional religion one attends a church or synagogue whereas in sport one attends a stadium or arena. The most significant ritual in religion, specifically in Christianity, is communion. Many Christian churches partake in this ritual on countless occasions throughout the year. Richard Lipsky points out about sport that, “During the game, the social euphoria generates a festive communion and sense of solidarity between the players and fans.” No religious service that takes place can be completed without its ritual hymns and chants. This is the same for sport; it too cannot be completed without its rituals. For example, in baseball there is the 7th inning stretch which occurs each game along with the singing of “Take Me Out to the Ball Game.” Additionally, the singing of the national anthem at a sporting event is a consummate resemblance of the singing of a holy song in church. Furthermore, there are apparent important seasonal rituals in the world’s major religions that are welded into festivals that bring together devout believers. These include Easter, Christmas, Palm Sunday, Good Friday, Lent,

Hanukkah, etc. Sport relatively functions in the same manner as each major sport crowns its champion; Super Bowl, World Series, NBA Finals, NBA All-Star, The Masters, World Cup, etc. Similar to religion this brings together devout believers. “The result is clear: from a combination of seasonal and personal ritual processes, sport activity provides a continual stream of resacralization and meaning for our everyday world, just as traditional religion offers.”⁴⁵

LEGENDARY FIGURES

The legends and historical accounts that are preserved through generations are what complete religious tradition. Religions need a strong legendary basis to complement the historical data of the faith. For instance, in Christianity there are stories of the parting of the Red Sea and the building of an ark due to the Flood, however these stories could not be absolute without their legendary figures, Moses and Noah. Legendary figures offer faithful believers a leader to emulate and model themselves after, and in some cases, to worship.⁴⁶ These type of legendary figures are seen all throughout religious history; Jesus, Muhammad, Malcolm X, Dalai Lama, Joseph Smith, Moses, Abraham, Elijah. Sport is no different; it has its legendary figures, historical stories and myths. When discussing the legendary figures of sport, there is no doubt that it will include those figures like Michael Jordan, Babe Ruth, Pele, Zinedine Zidane, Ted Williams, Larry Bird, Joe Montana, Tiger Woods, Wayne Gretsky. These legends are worshipped throughout the entire world as they provide for their respective sport an

⁴⁵ Hoffman, *Sport and Religion*, 49.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

archetypical model that holds true for future generations, similar to those legendary figures in traditional religion.

RELIGIOUS WARS

Those who do not understand the seriousness of sport have certainly not been aware of wars that have been started because of sporting events. Similar to religious wars, such as those that took place from the 7th century to the 19th century, there are wars as a result of sport. There have been ample religious wars through medieval times including the Muslim conquests, the Crusades, the Spanish Reconquista, and the Thirty Years' War. Today, there are still violent conflicts between Israel and Palestine and such wars as the Yugoslav Wars and the Syrian civil war. These wars are due to religious extremism or radical Islamic Jihadism. The most well-known religious wars were the Crusades. These were a series of brutal military campaigns that were aimed at taking control of land, as well as access to shrines associated with the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, from the Muslims. The Holy Land was seized by the Crusaders but in later crusades the Muslims would recover these lands. The Crusades lasted for many centuries all throughout Europe, Africa and Asia.

The Thirty Years' War was another renowned religious war that transpired all throughout Europe in the 17th century. This war consisted of many brutal battles as well as the reformation of the continent of Europe. It began because Archbishop Ferdinand II, who was an ardent supporter of the Catholic cause, ordered the destruction of a Protestant church and the imposition of Catholic absolutism on the Protestant nobles. As a result, the Protestant nobles rose up in rebellion.

In 1969 Honduras and El Salvador participated in a religious war but this was as a result of a soccer match. It would become known as the Soccer War. This 100 hour war claimed 6,000 lives, leaving 12,000 wounded and 50,000 people homeless as a result. It all commenced with the country of Honduras witnessing a bitterly contested first match of the World Cup where the Hondurans beat the El Salvadorans 1-0 during the last minute. This match was stirred up by newspapers on both sides as they started a war of words that built up the intense aggression of the match. However, the night before the match, Honduran fans used psychological warfare on the Salvadoran team by disrupting them outside of their hotel all throughout the night, a common practice in Latin America. After the match many fights broke out between loyal fans on both sides resulting in the stadium being set ablaze. In the second match in El Salvador, the hotel where the Honduran team was staying was burnt to the ground, fortunately the players escaped the burning building. The team would be escorted to the stadium by armored military vehicles as mobs pursued revenge. El Salvador would, inevitably, win that match 3-0 as the Honduran team looked exhausted throughout the entire match. As the Honduran team fled back out of the country, there were riots that caused cars to set afire and left stores devastated. All media outlets predicted bloodshed in the final match in Mexico City. It would turn out to be a war as the Salvadoran air force attacked targets by dropping bombs deep inside of Honduras as well as launching major offensives against them. Honduran forces would cripple the Salvadoran air force as well as their oil storage facilities. They bombarded important Salvadoran industrial and strategic targets. In the frenzied streets

of Honduras, people dug trenches, rushed through the streets directionless, and student brigades painted enormous slogans on walls and fences. Graffiti was everywhere.

“ONLY AN IMBECILE WORRIES NOBODY BEATS HONDURAS”

“PICK UP YOUR GUNS AND LET’S GO GUYS CUT THOSE SALVADORANS
DOWN TO SIZE WE’LL AVENGE THREE-NIL”

A ceasefire was called but El Salvador resisted and the war continued for a few more days. The Salvadoran army began to come to a halt, making for the arrangement of a cease-fire much easier. On the 20th of July of 1969 the cease-fire took full effect.

This connection accentuates the fanaticism sport has attained through the past decades, something that will be touched on further in the next section. Sport mimics religion in the sense of denunciation and rejection of differing beliefs. When it comes to religion, devoted or deeply “religious people” are very unaccepting of other views and beliefs. For example, many Christians are intolerant to Muslim and Buddhists views and vice versa. This is also the case with sport. Enthusiasts of the NFL team the Washington Redskins will be unaccepting of any other team in the league and the same will be said for enthusiasts of the Pittsburgh Steelers or in soccer with Real Madrid and FC Barcelona. Let’s consider the aspect of conversion that occurs in religion which is manifested in sport as well. This aspect of conversion results in a theological or moral battle between good and evil which occurs in the rivalries throughout sport. This entails the choosing of sides in a rivalry in sport which is similar to two opposing religions, for example Christianity versus Muslim. For many, the love felt for one implies the hate felt for their respective rival. This holds true for the rivalry between the University of North

Carolina and Duke University; the most well-known rivalry throughout college athletics. Conversion is also seen when one moves to a new city and adopts that city's team as their favorite team. It also can be seen in relationships where one adopts their spouse's favorite team.

As we move forward this will be touched upon much deeper but one can begin to grasp the connections of fanaticism and extremism between sport and religion.

In Shirl Hoffman's *Sport as a Religion*, Michael Novak writes about his deep feelings on football:

In order to be entertained, I watch television: prime-time shows. They slide effortlessly by. I am amused, or distracted, or engrossed. Good or bad, they help to pass the time pleasantly enough. Watching football on television is totally different. I don't watch football to pass. The outcome of the games affects me. I care. Afterward, the emotion I have lived through continues to affect me. Football is not entertainment. It is far more important than that. If you observe the passivity of television viewers being entertained, and the animation of fans watching a game on television, the difference between entertainment and involvement of spirit becomes transparent. Sport is more like religion than like entertainment. Indeed, at a contest in the stadium, the "entertainment" —the bands, singers, comedians, balloons, floats, fireworks, jets screaming overhead—pales before the impact of the contest itself, like lemonade served to ladies while the men are drinking whiskey.⁴⁷

Both sport and religion are extremely powerful. Sport has the power to exhilarate or depress and the same for religion, as participants can be elated as a result of blessings or depressed as a result of sinning in their religion. Sport and religion are both symbolic systems. As alluded to earlier, both systems emphasize sacrifice, commitment, suffering, fellowship with others, celebration. In religion there are sacrificial offerings and even sacrificing one's life; in sport there is sacrifice of self for the good of the team and the

⁴⁷ Hoffman, *Sport and Religion*, 38.

sacrifice of other important life events. In religion there is the commitment of one's life to the religion; in sport there is commitment to one's team. In religion there is pain and suffering because of persecution or through self-imposed trials; in sport there is pain and suffering because of competition and the agony of defeat. "Religion and sport are symbolic systems that emphasize similar values and goals, including transcendence of limited personal desires in favor of nonmaterial achievements or experiences and an emphasis on cooperation and personal sacrifice for the good of the group."⁴⁸ The connections between sport and religion are abundant. So to presuppose that sport completely parallels religion is not far from the truth, if not the truth. "Religion integrates society on the basis of shared beliefs, which are reinforced through religious rituals and which in turn function to reaffirm the significance of the group and bestow on it a special identity. Finally, religious exercises and rituals offer a way of regulating, managing, and expressing emotions, thus preventing disintegration of the social order through displays of mass uncontrolled emotion. It is sport's relationship to some of these latent functions that has attracted the most attention of scholars who describe sport as a religion."⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Mari Womack, *Sports and Religion* (online; Encyclopedia of Religion, 2005), in Gale Virtual Reference Library, <http://go.galegroup.com/go.libproxy.wfubmc.edu/>.

⁴⁹ Hoffman, *Sport and Religion*, 5.

SPORT FANDOM

As previously mentioned, the aspect that invites the comparison between sport and religion is the intense excitement and the spirit of community that they both generate. Sport mimics religion's rituals and induces fanaticism and sensation. Fandom is what this has been termed. Fandom characterizes the feeling of fascination with a subject or activity and the camaraderie with others who share the same interest. Catherine Bell, in *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, also defined it as "a way of action by a ritualized social body who possesses, to various degrees, a cultural sense of ritual." Sport fandom essentially is the major reason why this comparison has been made between the two systems. On a daily basis religious radicalism is seen throughout the world with the violence that occurs due to religious views. We see groups being punished for voicing opinions contrary to the Church's doctrine, people being martyred, and the hate produced because of different beliefs. The passion, commitment, dedication, and affection that fans of sport express is entirely similar to the way followers of traditional religion express theirs. Fans have rituals and formal procedures that are performed before, during and after sporting events that resemble those performed for religious purposes. Similar to traditional religion and its extremists, sport also possesses its radical followers. Fans put much of their time, focus, energy, effort, and money into sport, and today's society has been shaped to accommodate this.

The 2005 Farrelly brothers-directed film "Fever Pitch" depicts the extreme nature of sport fandom. It portrays the life of a fanatic baseball fan whose main priority and only love in life is his favorite team, the Boston Red Sox. He is an obsessed fan that

attends every home game and never misses a road game. A life encircled around the Red Sox and everything that involves them. The apartment he lives in has a reproduction of the Green Monster – the left field wall in Fenway Park – that covers half his living room. His closet is lined up with Red Sox jerseys and team warm-ups, in addition to the countless bobble-head dolls and team memorabilia throughout the room. He sleeps in a Red Sox T-shirt each night, uses a Red Sox credit card and even has Yankees toilet paper. This is a perfect illustration of the fandom that has been formed from sport.

THE TOTEM

There is a negative perception attached to sport fandom due to the violence that has occurred because of sporting events. The aggression of fans is the aspect of sport fandom that contributes to its negative connotation. This aggressive behavior of fans may include: taunting opposing players, coaches, and fans; harassing officials; using profanity; throwing things on the field of play; vandalism; spilling a beverage on another fan; refusing to move out of someone's line of sight; obscene gestures; and pushing, shoving, or striking another person. These are a few examples of fandom being excessive although this is the norm in stadiums and arenas. Think about a college or professional football game in the United States, is this not normal behavior? Even think about European and South American soccer matches, the behavior gets much more excessive than that. This is not unlike religion; religious sects can be excessive with their beliefs. They will fight, harass, and foster hate to others because of different religious views and beliefs. They may also disrupt others' religious ceremonies or rituals. Consider the persecution that many religions deal with because of the hate fostered toward them.

Emile Durkheim compared this to the idea of totemism. This system of belief is that humans have a spiritual connection to a spirit-being or totem. A totem is any object or symbol that serves as an emblem of a group of people such as an animal, the sun, moon, constellations, etc. The totem is the sign by which each group distinguishes itself. For example, Christianity distinguishes itself by the symbol of The Cross and likewise in Judaism the Star of David. This is no different in sport. Teams have totems that distinguish themselves as well. For example, the Dallas Cowboys have the famous navy blue and white star that represents them, additionally the Indianapolis Colts have the blue horseshoe. Interestingly, the most famous totem in all of sport may be the New York Yankees' interlocking "NY." The totem gives believers a physical representation of that need for identity and unity, what matters is that through our faith in these artifacts, community is forged.⁵⁰

In addition to the totem, Durkheim discusses the Indian tribes of America long ago, and their clans. Because it was their religion, clans would permanently carve, engrave and design their totem on any and every object that belonged to them because it was their religion. They did not only put totems merely upon the things which they possessed, but they put it upon themselves, they imprinted it upon their flesh, it became a part of them, and this world of representations is even by far the more important one. The Indian tribes of the Northwest America long ago, at certain religious festivals, would wear garments which represent their totem, so if the totem is a bird then the people of the tribe would wear feathers of this bird on their heads. Each tribe or clan had its own

⁵⁰ Michael Serazio, "Just How Much is Sports Fandom Like Religion?," *The Atlantic*, <http://www.theatlantic.com/>.

special fashion to represent their totem, such as wearing one's hair a certain way or painting one's body. Is this any different than what fans do at stadiums and arenas present-day? There is no difference. The form and expressions that sport fans execute are no different than that of the Indian clans. Sport fans have their team's totem permanently carved, engraved and designed on memorabilia, clothing, and vehicles as well as on any and everything that they possess. Similarly to the Indian clans, sport fans imprint their totem upon their flesh. We see numerous fans with tattoos of their favorite team on them. In stadiums and arenas, we see fans all over representing their totem in various ways. Many may wear feathers or a feathered cap to represent their totem if it is a bird. Others may paint or decorate their faces and bodies or will wear other types of garments signifying their team. Either way fans will symbolize their totem in outrageous ways. Nevertheless, identifying with a different totem or team than someone else can cause tension and animosity. This is not the case all the time, but it does fit in some situations, just like in religion there are believers that are accepting of others' beliefs and not belligerent toward them and their faith.

TRANSCENDENCE OF SPORT

Society has, without a doubt, been shaped to cater to the needs of fans as a result of the high demand of sport and it becoming an immensely profitable business. Many of the sports such as professional and college basketball, professional and college football, professional soccer, baseball, and professional hockey have become billion-dollar industries. Society has put so much emphasis in sport because fans have put the majority of their time, focus and energy into it. Why is this? Sport has a way of allowing fans to

escape their dull lives of limitations and disappointments, just as religion helps the faithful to transcend their everyday existence, therefore the face painting, dying of the hair, and distinctive costumes satisfy the goals of identifying with the team and establishing a community of fans. “Shaped by the needs of capitalist systems, spectator sport serves vested interests as a type of “cultural anesthesia,” an opiate that distracts, diverts, and deflects attention from the pressing social problems and issues of the day.”⁵¹ The city of New Orleans can attest to this after Hurricane Katrina completely destroyed the city in 2005. The New Orleans community was profoundly devastated after the hurricane killed many and left thousands homeless, forcing people to find refuge in the Superdome, the New Orleans Saints stadium. A few years later the New Orleans Saints won the Super Bowl, making it become one of the most heartfelt stories in sport history. “The Saints became a symbol of resurrection and hope for a city that struggled to hoist its head above water when one of the worst natural disasters in American history threatened to drown it.”⁵² Many of the New Orleans natives and fans felt that this win gave hope to the city as well as providing courage, pride, self-respect a sense of accomplishment, and just an overall improvement of the local psyche. Moreover, it was able to take the city’s attention off of the major issues they were dealing with to enjoying football.

Just as religion makes explicit the almost nameless dreads of daily human life such as aging, dying, failure under pressure, cowardice, betrayal, guilt, competitive sports

⁵¹ Daniel L. Wann et al., *Sport fans: The psychology and social impact of spectators*. (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2001), 201.

⁵² Stephanie Karina, “Sports Give Cities heart. Sports Give Cities Life. Sports Give Cities Hope.,” *Thought Catalog*, <http://thoughtcatalog.com/>.

embody these in every way as well.⁵³ Sport has become so vitally a part of fans' lives that they will postpone or put off other important life events just to sit down and watch or attend a game to cheer for their favorite team. This is exemplified through college basketball with March Madness. Millions of Americans involve themselves in filling out an NCAA Tournament bracket. Many employees will either put aside their work to keenly watch the games or skip work altogether. Students will also skip school to stay home and watch. "A study conducted by Challenger, Gray & Christmas, Inc., concluded that American businesses lose a combined \$1.2 billion for every hour of employee unproductivity during March Madness."⁵⁴ In addition, a team winning or losing has the power to dictate a fan's week; it can either electrify or ruin it. The attachment that fans have to sport has dictated society. The world of sports has become a 24 hour/7 day a week thing. The creation of ESPN and all of its networks has allowed for fans to have sport at their fingertips at any time. ESPN, ESPN2, ESPN3, ESPNEWS, ESPNU, ESPN DEPORTES, NFL Network, MLB Network, NHL Network, and the MLS Network are just a few of the programs that give fans 24 hour coverage of sport. As a result, fans are consuming much more sport. This is undeniably similar to how religious programming is all over television with networks such as TBN, CBN, TCT and Daystar. In an age of technology and an increase in social media use, sport has seen dramatic growth. Social Media has allowed fans the opportunity to get closer to and interact with teams and players, and fans have taken full advantage of it. Athletes such as Lebron James and

⁵³ Hoffman, *Sport and Religion*, 40.

⁵⁴ Shane Dale, "March Madness 2014: 5 crazy facts about NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament," *KNXV*, <http://www.abc15.com/>.

Christiano Renaldo have become the most followed athletes in social media, with 12 million followers and 25 million followers respectively.

HERO WORSHIP

Fans have come to adore these athletes, more specifically superstar athletes. As talked about earlier, fans engage in hero worship toward their favorite players, similar to the way believers worship important people in their religion. “Athletes are not merely entertainers. Their role is far more powerful than that. People identify with them in a much more priestly way. Athletes exemplify something of deep meaning—frightening meaning, even. Once they become superstars, they do not quite belong to themselves. Great passions are invested in them. They are no longer treated as ordinary humans or even as mere celebrities. Their exploits and their failures have great power to exult—or to depress.”⁵⁵ Virtually every sport has its own version of a Hall of Fame to honor the sport and its heroes. These heroes are all enshrined in Halls of Fame, as they continue to be admired and their memories are kept alive. Not any different than the way a sacred text in traditional religion keeps the memories of important people in their religion alive. Followers of Catholicism have their heroes that they can worship and admire such as Mary and St. Paul. In addition, present-day ministers are also worshipped and admired by their followers. Ministers such as Billy Graham, Cho Yong-gi, Creflo Dollar, Joyce Meyer, Joel Osteen, and T.D Jakes are highly venerated by their followers. Nevertheless, many of these fanatic fans will even go as far as creating shrines for their favorite players in their own houses. One writer said as a big Michael Jordan fan, he spent countless

⁵⁵ Hoffman, *Sport and Religion*, 41.

hours transforming his room into a Michael Jordan shrine. Anything Michael Jordan-related such as photos, jerseys, posters, newspaper and magazine articles, he had it. He also tried to imitate everything that Michael Jordan did on the court just like every young sport fan does.⁵⁶ What about the fan that can recite every player's stats off the top of their head? Is it not similar to a follower of a religion reciting their sacred text flawlessly?

On the other hand, as much as these athletes can be adored by fans they also can be highly criticized and tormented for every minor mistake they make. Because of their status, their lives are not their own anymore, therefore their mistakes are greatly magnified and exaggerated. For instance, Lebron James, forward of the Miami Heat, was highly criticized and verbally tormented by the world after he publicly professed his intention to leave the Cleveland Cavaliers and play with the Miami Heat. The moment it was announced, the city of Cleveland became outraged as many fans cried, some publicly burned his jersey and some rioted in the streets of Cleveland. In 2013, fans had a similar reaction to the play of their quarterback. Matt Schaub, former Quarterback of the Houston Texans, threw multiple interceptions for touchdowns in three consecutive games including one in the final minutes of a game to eventually lose it. Fans were so irate over this that some fans bought his jersey just to burn it. These athletes can either be glorified by a fan-base or utterly detested by them. Nevertheless, hero worship is just another similarity that sport and religion share in this aspect of sport fandom.

⁵⁶ Matt Beardmore, "Is it Safe to Worship Athletes?," *Psychology Today*, <http://www.psychologytoday.com/>.

SPORT RADICALISM

The aforementioned aspects of sport fandom that have been discussed are not quite as drastic as some may have presumed. However, sport fandom gets extreme at times. Concurring with Michael Novak's argument in *The Joy of Sports*, he argues that sport fandom constitutes a type of "natural religion," flowing outward from a deep natural impulse that is radically religious. Similar to the way of religion and how some followers are radicals and will die for their beliefs, sport fans will do the same. Some will endure harassment and persecution while others will commit suicide. The fanatical ways of some sport fans are sad and unfortunate.

Consider the 1950 World Cup Final between Brazil and Uruguay. Brazil had to either have a victory or draw to win the title while Uruguay had to win it. Brazil had won their last matches superiorly while Uruguay encountered a few difficulties in their wins. The Brazilian faithful anticipated an easy win just like the previous matches. The morning before the game, the streets of Rio de Janeiro were full of activity as the faithful began to get ready for a victory and celebration. They organized a carnival and chants of "Brazil must win" were heard all throughout the streets. Brazil had gold watches and limousines reserved for the Brazilian players and newspapers had already declared victory for Brazil. The FIFA president had already prepared a speech in Portuguese to congratulate the winner, whom they thought would be Brazil. Also, expecting Brazil to win, a Brazilian victory song was composed in anticipation of Brazil's easy victory; the title was considered theirs already. Attendance of the match was over 200,000, a record attendance for any match to the day. The roars of the crowd were deafening all

throughout the game but as soon as Uruguay scored their second goal to win the match 2-1, the Brazilian faithful were silent. All of Brazil refused to acknowledge their defeat, and many of the faithful plunged off the top of the stadium, committing mass suicide. The following days there were many more suicides reported due to the match. The Brazilian goalie was blamed for the goals for many decades after. In an interview a half-century later, he said “The maximum punishment in Brazil is 30 years imprisonment, but I have been paying, for something I am not even responsible for, by now for 50 years.”

In 2013 in northern Brazil, a referee was murdered for handing out a red card, the highest penalty in soccer which results in expulsion from the match. After a referee made a call against a player, the player disputed it and the referee gave him a red card. The player attacked the referee and the two began to fight, subsequently the referee pulled out a knife and stabbed the player. While they rushed the player to the hospital, fans nabbed the referee, tied him up and tortured him. Upon hearing of the player’s death on the way to the hospital, fans stoned the referee to death, cut his body into pieces, beheaded him and displayed it on a wooden stake at midfield.

This extreme aggression and seriousness of sport is not only seen in South American and European soccer but it can be seen any sport. In 2012, in a little league Pop Warner football game in the United States, a 13-year-old boy broke free and was running for an obvious touchdown. All of a sudden one of the coaches from the opposing team came out of nowhere and solidly tackled the player. The hit not only knocked him down but it knocked the kid out, giving him a concussion.

When it comes to rivalries in sport it is typical to hear of, or see, incidents of fighting and harassment. In 2013, after many confrontations which included talking smack and small scuffles between Giants and Dodgers fans at the baseball game, one man was stabbed to death. Apparently it all started after a group of men exchanged insults about each other's team.

These are just a few cases of the radical nature of sport fandom. This too may be another reason for the negative perception of sport fans. However, sport fandom has its positives psychologically for fans. Even psychologists claim that sport has many of the same effects on spectators as religion does. Scholars and psychologists both believe that fans are so highly committed to their favored stars and teams in a way that gives focus and meaning to their daily lives.⁵⁷ Research shows that there are mental health benefits associated with being emotionally connected to a group or sport team that makes you feel like you're a part of something greater than yourself. "Social connections resulting from sport team identification may prove beneficial to one's psychological health by serving as a buffer against depression and alienation while increasing self-esteem."⁵⁸ Research also found that higher levels of identification, or fandom, were positively correlated with the frequency of positive emotions and negatively correlated with the frequency of negative emotions. These strong attachments are related to a number of other indexes of psychological stability as well, including affective expression, alienation and vigor. J.L Price, in *Masking and transformation: The religious significance of masks for Super Bowl fans*, assigns great meaning to the face painting, hair tinting, and iconographic

⁵⁷ Nigel Barber, "Sport as Religion," *Huffington Post*, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/>.

⁵⁸ Daniel L. Wann et al., *Sport fans: The psychology and social impact of spectators*, 164.

costuming that have become so commonplace at sporting events throughout the world. He argues that these masking behaviors satisfy three specific religious drives: 1) securing identification with a favorite team, 2) helping the fan escape the structures of confinement and oppression that occur in everyday life, and 3) establishing a sense of community with other faithful fans.

FANTASY SPORT

Consider the growth of fantasy sports, more specifically Fantasy Football. It has become a multi-billion dollar online industry with more than 25.8 million people engaged in it in 2012. Fantasy sport is a game where participants act as owners to build a team that competes against other fantasy owners based on statistics generated. Participants spend over \$1.6 billion a year on products and services and \$1.44 billion in entry fees. It all starts with the fantasy draft and this is where all of the participants in their certain group get together and draft players for the upcoming week. This industry has become so popular and widespread that there have been television shows dedicated to managing your fantasy team such as Fantasy Football Now. Paul Charchian, the president of the Fantasy Sports Trade Association and who is also considered the ‘Godfather’ of fantasy sports, believes that 80% of today’s fantasy sports players fully intend to be playing 10 years from now and 40% intend to play until they die. He believes that this stems from “the fear of missing out” since everyone else is doing it. Fans have become so fanatical about fantasy sport that the reward for winning or the penalty of losing has become astonishing. One group in Omaha, Nebraska punishes the player that finishes dead-last in the league in an outrageous and shameful way. The loser must get a tattoo, designed by

the other owners. One year the loser received a tattoo of a unicorn kicking a field-goal over a rainbow with the phrase “Fantasy Loser” under it.⁵⁹

TAILGATING

Sport Fandom is seen in the ritualistic behavior that sport fans indulge themselves in before every sporting event. The behavior of fans painting their faces and body painting, in addition to the piling on of licensed apparel is all within the realm of sport fandom. Tailgating has become the most popular pre-game ritual in all of sport.

Tailgating can be described as a delicate balance between fandom and celebration. It is a place where a combination of fans can come and enjoy pre-game together while grilling food, drinking beer and throwing ball together. Whether it is the companionship or the comradeship that is produced before an intense sporting event, this act of pre-celebration has almost become just as important as the sporting event itself. Furthermore, despite all the changes and the growth of tailgating through the decades, one thing has endured, the spirit of the fans.

⁵⁹ Eric Edholm, “The Fantasy Football Tattoo League makes sure that the losing owner is scarred for life,” *Yahoo Sports*, <http://sports.yahoo.com/>.

CONCLUSION

Looking at both sport and religion from a societal perspective, one can see the relation and similarities between the two. One can understand the religious nature of sport and how the elements that are found within religion are also found within sport. Sport has become an obsession in this society as it can be seen with the numerous billion-dollar industries in sport including fantasy sport. It has forced society to cater to the demand of fans that put the majority of their time, energy and focus into sport. “The parallel between religion and sport might not be so far-fetched as one might think. As a result of mystical commitments, sport and religion open man towards the acceptance and actualization of being. A partial answer is now uncovered to our obvious difficulty in defining sport. Basically, sport, like religion defies definition. In a manner it goes beyond definitive terminology. Neither has substance which can be identified. In a sense both sport and religion are beyond essence.”⁶⁰

The comparisons are plenty when it comes to sport and religion. The spirit and rituals that are seen in sport today have become the same as seen in religious practices. Sport takes the form of religious devotion in many ways as it can be seen through the ceremonies and festivals like the Super Bowl, the rituals that fans perform such as face and body painting, or even the intense excitement and spirit of community generated. Even the jargon normally associated with religion is seen throughout sport. Words like faith, sacred, love, sacrifice, and dedication are now being associated with sport. Religion is a difficult term to define, however it can only be defined by its characteristics.

⁶⁰ Hoffman, *Sport and Religion*, 141.

It is made up of beliefs that are held by group of people, which is the community or church. Religion involves that which is sacred and profound, rites, rituals, and ceremonies or festivals. Sport is also another term that is not exactly defined but described by its characteristics. Howard Slusher identified its characteristics as, *Contention of Interest* or competition, *Consistency of Role*, *Utilization-Actualization*, and *Variable Predictability*. The numerous connections that sport and religion have allow for society today to notice the close parallel between sport and religion.

The spaces that these systems occupy are even comparable. One can compare the religious importance that both Madison Square Garden and the Sistine Chapel have on their followers as they both are iconic houses of worship. The expressions performed in the “sacred space” of both systems are no different to one another. One will experience the unity of clapping, singing, chants, and encouragement in both. The ritualistic behavior of the believers in both systems is a major reason why this comparison has been made. Rituals in traditional religion such as communion or the singing of a holy song have incredible significance just as the singing of the national anthem or the singing of “Take Me Out to the Ball Game” in baseball has. The festivals of Easter, Christmas, and Hanukkah bring together devout believers, no different than the way a championship game in sport brings together its followers. They both deal with shaping the individual and strengthening values. They develop character, reinforce commitment, perseverance, and suffering. There are legends and legendary figures among both systems that offer followers someone to emulate. There are comparisons to how followers in traditional religion are to imitate those like Moses, Muhammad, and Elijah in comparison to how

followers of sport are to imitate those like Tiger Woods, Michael Jordan, and Wayne Gretzky. Along the same lines, hero worship toward legendary figures occurs by fans and followers of traditional religion alike. There is also the transcendent quality that both sport and religion share which connects the followers of both to the “ultimate” or to a higher level. This gives them meaning to everyday life and can be manifested through the many sport fans who attempt to get their ashes dumped on playing-fields after death. The totem that Durkheim discusses distinguishes teams from one another but it also gives different meaning to different followers. Similar to how The Cross in Christianity may signify joy, hope, victory or triumph, a team’s logo may signify certain symbolizations for their followers. For example, the New Orleans Saints Fleur-de-lis logo now may signify hope, kinship, or benevolence.

As sport is similar to religion in these subtle ways, they both are similar in their radical ways as well. Religion, undeniably, has a well-documented history of radicalism however, as a result of its followers, sport shares religion’s fanaticism. Just as religion has religious wars, sport is no different with its soccer wars. In the same manner, just as religion has its followers sacrifice their life and commit suicide for what they believe in, sport likewise has had its followers sacrifice their own life for their sport. As powerful as religion is, sport is just as powerful on its followers as they commit their life to their sport or team. Followers endure pain and suffering but also the glory and the celebration that go with winning. The fandom of the followers in sport is another key reason to why this comparison is made. The extreme actions and ritualistic activities that fans partake in are similar to those that are participated within religion. Whether that is aggressive behavior

from fans toward one another or toward players or if that is praying during the last seconds of a big game hoping your team scores and win, it is no different than traditional religion. Murdering, persecuting, or harassing one for having a different belief in religion is similar to the murdering, persecuting or harassing that occur in sport because of one's love for a different team. It would be logical to believe that this kind of identification with a team or sport or even player is unhealthy but researchers suggests that it gives fans meaning to their daily lives and is a buffer against depression while increasing self-esteem. This is not unlike those followers of traditional religion giving rise to the impressions of joy, interior peace, serenity, and enthusiasm as proof of their beliefs.

Looking at sport and recognizing that it parallels religion, can we determine that in this 21st-century society that "Sport is the opiate of the masses?" The similarities that are seen between sport and religion make it difficult not to concur with this statement since sport has the same effect on its community of followers as traditional religion has on its community of followers. According to one critic, Sydney Harris, sport "has turned into a passion, a mania, a drug far more potent and widespread than any mere chemical substance, it is the new opium of the people."

FINAL INTERPRETATION

The religious elements of sport have not been sufficiently discussed in the past. This paper is my attempt at initiating a much needed conversation for those interested in further developing the comparison between these two systems. It could be recognized that there may be competitive propensity between the two systems as a result of the comparisons that have been made. In a culture that is increasingly consumed by sport,

traditional religion has found itself taking a backseat to this phenomenon. Sport has had an impact in religion, but could sport have such an effect on attendance in religious services? The number of people who leave services early to go home and catch their favorite team playing is slowly increasing. Also, families now will abandon worship service altogether to watch or attend a game. Many religions are in despair about how difficult it is to compete against these multi-billion dollar industries. So to continue to stay afloat in this culture that is becoming dominated by sport, service times have been added or altered to accommodate those consumers of sport. For example, churches are now ending early to allow people to catch games. Additionally, to keep things exciting in the religious services, sport has even been incorporated in. In many churches, for special games and events, it has become acceptable to wear your favorite team's jersey during service.

This paper demonstrates the importance of sport to people. Sport gives fans a heightened sense of devotion that has found a way to fill a space in them that only sport can fulfill. For some folk, sport is their religion. Sport gives them all of the elements that religion has and, most notably, gives them that transcendent element that not many things in this world are capable of providing. Since the religious elements are seen in sport it is not surprising to see that these systems have become competitors in this society. It is important that religious groups are made aware of this and mindful of the impact of sport on its followers. From this paper, one should take away from it that sport has a profound impact on people similar to the way religion does. This is displayed through the rituals and expressions that are performed in sport. The energy, effort, time, and money that

fans put into sport demonstrate how much sport affects the fan. This paper is intended to plant a seed for further discussion of this important topic. I am hoping that this paper gives insight to its readers of the profound impact that sport has on its consumers and, not only how sport is similar to religion, but how sport can be religion for some fans.

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