

Sport and the Christian Religion

Sport and the Christian Religion:
A Systematic Review of Literature

By

Nick J. Watson and Andrew Parker

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

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by Nick J. Watson and Andrew Parker

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From Nick:

To Ben, a man after God's own heart,
and a fine sports educator

From Andrew:

In memory of Ernie Dyer, my friend and mentor

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FOREWORD

It is a pleasure to write the foreword for a volume that provides such an ambitious, insightful, and useful overview of the intersection of sport and the Christian religion. The book is ambitious because it includes far-ranging analyses including the origins of scholarship on sport and religion as well as critical discussions of play and spirituality, sport as a civil religion, muscular Christianity and sport ministries, theological sport ethics, and the conjunction of religion, sport, and social institutions as evidenced in the governance and conduct of the modern Olympic Games. More than 1,050 references are cited in this comprehensive review of the literature. This ambitious and expansive list of resources includes the disciplines of theology, philosophy, history, sociology and psychology, among others.

The text is not merely a report on the results of recent and current research. Rather the authors, Nick Watson and Andrew Parker, insightfully and critically interpret the literature. Each chapter reads like a scholarly narrative, one that describes what we currently know, what we still do not know, what seems controversial, where current debates stand, and what needs further study. In each chapter, the content is categorized and otherwise organized in coherent ways, and helpful syntheses of multiple studies allow readers (particularly those who are not familiar with this literature) to make sense of it.

The book should be of considerable utility to at least two groups of scholars—first, those who focus on sport and need to know how religion has shaped its nature and value and second, those who focus on religion and are interested in how

sport has affected it for better or worse. The authors argue that this interface is so significant, it would be impossible (or at least foolhardy) to attempt a comprehensive study of either sport or religion in the absence of the other one.

This claim would undoubtedly seem less controversial for those who, like myself, focus on the sport side of the equation. It is impossible, most of us would argue, to understand sport without appreciating its origins in sacred play, ritual, the mythic significance of agon, and the like. Most of us sport philosophers agree, along with Novak, that there is considerable overlap between the values and experiences found in religion and those encountered in sport. But Watson and Parker also show how spiritual practices have been influenced and shaped by sporting activities and motifs, whether from Ancient Olympia or a contemporary sports stadium. The entire volume bears testimony to the interesting and complex symbiosis that exists between sport and religion, one that ranges from crass and shameless opportunism, on the one hand, to both subtle and profound interactions that result in mutual enhancement, on the other.

Throughout the text, the authors are careful to balance enthusiasm for positive bi-directional influences with respect for the integrity of each domain itself. In fact, the volume itself is based on the premise that sport is not religion and is not an effective substitute for it. Conversely, religion cannot be reduced to sport. Each brings its own rules and purposes, as it were, to the relationship. While a fruitful marriage is possible and may well be desirable, caution is also warranted.

This cautious tone of the volume is one that scholars of sport and religion alike should appreciate. The focus of the text is on accurate understanding, not devotional commitment. In other words, this review provides a guide for using and digesting the best multi-disciplinary and cross-denominational research available and following it wherever it leads. Because

of this, the book should be a worthy resource for serious students of sport and religion for years to come.

Professor Scott Kretchmar,
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PREFACE

This slim volume will prove an invaluable resource for scholars interested in a serious and multidisciplinary investigation of sport and will therefore no doubt be a discipline-defining document for years to come. Nick Watson and Andrew Parker have produced a winning combination of ecumenical and disciplinary breadth which is notable for the generosity with which they offer future scholars and students well-informed and sharply articulated questions for further scholarly investigation. Their careful teasing apart of the differences between a wide range of methods for studying sport and (and *as*) religion gives crucial definition to a field that has so obviously been characterized in modernity more by passing references and side remarks in the scholarly literature than serious and sustained investigation, especially in the field of academic theology.

Precisely because of the modesty and diligence evident in the labour of producing a comprehensive bibliography of the field, they win readers over for their ground-breaking (and theologically faithful) insistence that types of methodological analysis that Christians have often avoided, such as that of Marxism or psychoanalysis, ought to be taken seriously by Christians, and by Christian scholars. This contribution is sure to render the book mandatory reading for every undergraduate and graduate student interested in the theme of sport of religion or sport and Christianity.

What Watson and Parker offer us is no generic celebration of sport as something that Christians should without hesitation embrace as a “school for character,” but a

sensitive and probing analysis of major questions and problems of which every Christian involved in sport or in the oversight of sporting activities in our modern societies should be aware. Does sport augment the worst aspects of modern societies, or can it be a place of resistance to the forces that destroy and impoverish human life in our age? How do followers of the “suffering servant” understand sport’s demand for the “killer instinct”? How ought Christians to approach the gender stereotypes that permeate sport, or sports in which serious injury or death are a constant possibility? What are we doing when we engage in “sport’s ministries,” and how are we to understand the role of professional Christians, such as chaplains, in sports ministry? These are serious questions which Watson and Parker bring before us with intellectual rigor and clarity, offering the reader at the same time an impressive array of references that will be relevant for further reading.

They also propose some genuinely novel and theologically rich questions, such as: How might sports serve peace and reconciliation in arenas of social and political conflict? How might the psychological conditioning demanded by sport be related to spiritual disciplines? How ought all Christians, players and fans alike, understand their relation to the role that the pageantry surrounding sport has come to play in shoring up and inflaming modern cults of nationalism? These are old questions but ones which appear to us in new guises that make them very difficult to recognize as even approachable from classic Christian theological affirmations about the nature of reality. Watson and Parker show us many roads which we might follow from traditional theological truths into the theologically rich territory of modern sporting activity. In this they have done the church, of all denominations, a great service, not least in drawing their treatment together with the marvellous final

declaration of ten affirmations that every Christian should consider as they think about, watch, or invest themselves in sporting activity.

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Trothen, and Steven Waller. Last, but by no means least, we would like to express our deep gratitude to our wives, Kate and Beckie, for their love and patience during the construction of this manuscript. Any errors or inaccuracies are, of course, entirely our own.

INTRODUCTION

Sport seduces the teeming ‘global village’; it is the new opiate of the masses; it is one of the great modern experiences ... sport is a mirror ... that reflection is sometimes bright, sometimes dark, sometimes distorted, sometimes magnified. This metaphorical mirror is a source of mass exhilaration and depression, security and insecurity, pride and humiliation, bonding and alienation. Sport, for many, has replaced religion as a source of emotional catharsis and spiritual passion ... the story of modern sport is the story of the modern world ... sport demands the attention of the academic.

—Mangan, Majumdar and Dyreson (2009: xii-xiii)

Scholars who have written about the relationship between sport and Christianity are in general agreement that academics outside the traditional social-science sports studies disciplines¹, such as theologians and philosophers of religion, have been slow to recognise the cultural significance of modern sports (e.g., Hoffman, 2010a; Twietmeyer, 2009, 2008; Watson, 2011a). As this review demonstrates, this trend is slowly changing. In addition to the birth of research centres, academic journals and Church-based, sport-faith initiatives, the contributors to recent monographs and anthologies that analyse the various aspects of the relationship between the Christian religion and sport now include scholars from across a plethora of disciplines and denominations (see Appendix A).²

¹ These include sociology, history, anthropology, philosophy and psychology.

² Appendix A provides a concise summary of academic and practical developments in the area.

Historians and anthropologists have mapped a relationship between religion and sport that spans approximately 3000 years and many of the more recent scholarly examinations of the dialectical relation between sports and Christianity are indebted to this work. Links between the sacred and sport have been identified in a number of historical epochs. These include primitive times when ritual-cultic ball-games were played to appease the gods (for fertility), the athletic spectacles of ancient Greece and the Olympic games that were held in honour of mythological deities, the gladiatorial contests of Rome, the festivals and folk-games of the Middle-ages in Britain and Europe, Puritanical suspicion and prohibitions against sports, and finally, Victorian muscular Christianity (1850-1910), a socio-theological movement and (some would argue) ideology, that significantly shaped the character of modern sports (see: Baker, 1988, 2007a, 2010; Ballou, 1973; Brasch, 1970; Carter, 1984a, 1984b; Coleman, 1989; Eisen, 1975; Eyler, 2013; Guttman, 1978/2004; Kelly, 2012; Koch, 2012; Lipoński, 2009; McLeod, 2012; Mathisen, 2005).³ Additionally, there is a small corpus of work that has explored how sport interacts with other monotheistic and eastern (pantheistic) world religions, such as Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and Shintoism. These accounts provide useful comparative insights for scholars examining the sport-Christianity relationship (e.g., Benn, Dagkas and Jawad, 2011; Benn, Pfister and Jawad, 2010; Meyer, 2009; Hargreaves, 2007; Magdalinski and Chandler, 2002; Prebish, 1993a; Hyland, 1990).

Considering Christianity's Hebraic roots in the old testament and its inseparable ties to Jewish history, faith and tradition, the discourse that is fast-developing around Judaism and sporting pursuits will undoubtedly assist scholars when

³ For a brief overview of the sport-religion relationship see Baker (2010) and Mathisen (2005).

examining the relationship between sports and Christianity, especially in relation to historical, theological and sociological research on gender, embodiment and identity (e.g., Greenspoon, 2012; Alpert, 2011; Borish, 2009, 2002; Kaufman and Galily, 2009; Mendelsohn, 2009; Meyer, 2009; Kugelmass, 2007; Gurock, 2005; Eisen, 1998). In this book, however, our central task is to review empirical research and scholarship on sport and Christianity.⁴ While unavoidably touching on aspects of the sport-faith relationship throughout the last two millennia in order to ensure that we historically and culturally locate our analysis,⁵ our over-riding focus is the modern forms of sport that were birthed in Victorian Britain in the middle-to-late nineteenth century (1850-1910). The review is structured around six themed sections which comprise: (i) theologies of play in sport, (ii) sport, religion and popular culture, (iii) muscular Christianity and sports ministry, (iv) theological ethics in sport (with psychological considerations), (v) institutions and governance of sport: a case study of the modern Olympic Games, and (vi) emerging research topics. The discussion is prefaced by a brief overview of pioneering scholars and initiatives in the field and an outline of our aims and method.

Aims and Method

The aim of this systematic review is twofold. First, it seeks to identify, critically appraise and synthesise scholarship, empirical research and practical initiatives (e.g., research centres and organisations) in the sport-Christianity field.

⁴ The key existing literature reviews on sport and religion (not specifically Christianity) are those of Higgs (1982) and Deardorff, (2000), the latter being an updated and revised edition of Higgs' earlier work.

⁵ For example, the exegesis and use of Pauline athletic metaphors, the principles of medieval sport and the perspectives of the Church Fathers (Patristic writings) on physical education and culture.

Second, it seeks to identify, encourage and facilitate emerging areas of research in this area by providing extensive resources from both the social scientific study of sport and the theological study of sport. A major finding of this review is that there has been a distinct lack of cross-disciplinary and cross-denominational dialogue between those examining the relationship between sports and Christianity. Whilst not exhaustive the review identifies key debates, seminal articles and scholarly texts and initiatives, allowing the reader to further explore specific themes of interest. The review adopts a systematic approach, although as the topic sits within the social sciences, it does not adhere to the stringent requirements of the *Cochrane Collaboration* format of a systematic review (Aveyard, 2008).

In terms of the published work under consideration here, the majority of the sources referred to are from peer-reviewed journal articles and academic text books published in the English language.⁶ In addition, we include a selection of oft-cited articles from periodicals (e.g., *Sports Illustrated*), popular books, academic conference papers and PhD theses that specifically inform the academic literature. In order to encourage stronger links between theory and practice in the sport-faith world, we also direct readers to resources written by practitioners from the fields of sports chaplaincy, sports mission/ministry and sport psychology all of which are areas

⁶ There have been a number of academic books on sport and Christianity published in German and Italian most notably by Alois Koch who has had some of his academic papers and book chapters translated into English and which are available online, see:

<http://www.con-spiration.de/koch/#english>. See also the *Religioni e Società* (trans. *Italian Review of the Sociology of Religion*, 2011: Vol. 71) special edition on “Sport and Spirituality” (only available in Italian) and *Stadion: International Journal of History* (2009: Vol. 35) special edition on “Sport and Religion” comprising essays in English, German and French.

in need of further study. While the numerous biographies of Christian sportspersons (e.g., Dungy, 2008; Keddie, 2007; Tebow, 2011), devotional literature (e.g., Lipe, 2005; O'Toole, 2001) and post-graduate theses provide invaluable insights for academic researchers, they are generally beyond the scope and remit of our discussion.⁷

Electronic databases used to source the literature include: ATLASReligion with ATLASerials, SportsDiscuss, Worldcat, Google Scholar, Index to Theses (to identify key researchers), British Education Index, CINAHL and PschINFO. Key words and combinations of words utilised for electronic searching with the word sport(s) were: Christianity, Christians, theology, Olympics/Paralympics/Special Olympics/Olympism, spirituality, women, faith, religion, God, Pauline athletic metaphors, Catholics/Protestants and muscular Christianity. The bibliographies of recent texts and hard and electronic copies of sport and theology journals held at York St John University⁸ and the British Library (Boston Spa, England), were also a means of sourcing material. In addition, many of the publications reviewed were identified from our engagement and professional roles in the field and from correspondence with key authors over the past decade. In order to provide historical context to the conceptual and

⁷ For a comprehensive list of sport-faith biographies, PhD and Masters theses on sport and Christianity, see Stuart Weir's online bibliography: http://www.veritesport.org/downloads/Sports_bibliography_shorter.pdf Scholes and Sassower (2013) identify the need for a keen sense of criticality when academic scholars use insights from sporting biographies in their work.

⁸ York St John University (YSJU), UK library holds significant resources for the study of sport and religion/Christianity, with approximately 30 different academic book titles on the topic. This stems from the pioneering work of the *Centre for the Study of Sport and Spirituality* (2003-2009) at YSJU and undergraduate (and related postgraduate) course offerings and the related research of academic staff.

theoretical development of the literature surrounding sport and Christianity, it is to the pioneering work of some of these key authors that we initially turn.

CHAPTER ONE

PIONEERING SCHOLARS AND INITIATIVES IN THE FIELD¹

Until relatively recently, the majority of academic reflection on the relationship between sport and Christianity, has come from American scholars. During the post-war years of the 1960s, and amidst a swathe of civil and human rights movements, the United States witnessed a critical reassessment of all of its major social institutions including sports. In this era sporting organisations became increasingly professionalized and driven by free-market capitalist forces and political agendas, and thus, were ripe for social-scientific and theological analysis. While the pioneers in this particular field had a small number of writings at their disposal, for example, articles published in Church periodicals (Brasch, 1970; McNeill, 1948; Anderson, 1925)² and popular sports magazines (Deford, 1976a, 1976b, 1976c, 1976d, 1986), academic journal papers, chapters and books³ and popular Christian literature (Peale, 1957), which included an edited collection (Simonson, 1962) of testimonies from athletes who were associated with

¹ Details of the individuals discussed in this section have been verified through email correspondence and personal communication with those concerned.

² Two decades later the US periodical, *Christianity Today* (1986, April 4), published a special edition on sports.

³ For example: Brasch (1970), Callois (1958), Edwards (1973), Miller (1969), Neale (1969), Slusher (1967) and Weiss, (1969). Oft-cited chapters and journal articles were: Deford (1979), Dirksen (1975), Hogan (1967), Miller (1971), Twomey (1958) and Wenkert (1963).

the *Fellowship of Christian Athletes* (FCA, 1952/54-), it was Michael Novak's seminal text, *The Joy of Sports* (1967/1994) that provided the first systematic study of the sport-faith interface and the foundation for what was to follow.⁴ Since then, Novak has made numerous conference presentations on the topic,⁵ published a small number of articles in periodicals and has more recently written the *Foreword* to an edited anthology on sports and Christianity (Watson and Parker, 2013a). As a consequence of his wider professional interests and responsibilities, however, Novak has not produced any further in-depth scholarly analyses on the sport-faith interface. One of the chapters from his ground-breaking book was re-published in Shirl Hoffman's edited anthology on sport and religion, the first of its kind.

Shirl J. Hoffman, Emeritus Professor of Kinesiology at the University of North Carolina (Greensboro, USA) and former college basketball coach and official, began his work on sport and the Christian faith by producing a handful of academic papers (Hoffman, 1976, 1986, 1985, 1991), and then published the first edited anthology on the topic in 1992(a), which includes contributions from other pioneers in the field (i.e., Novak, Higgs, Price and Mathisen).⁶ Following nearly four decades of scholarly engagement on this topic, Hoffman recently published a single-authored text, *Good Game: Christianity and the Culture of Sports* (Hoffman, 2010a)⁷

⁴ Novak's book is widely cited across the academic disciplines. For further details of Novak's career see his personal webpage:

<http://www.michaelnovak.net/>

⁵ Professor Novak has made a provisional agreement to deliver a keynote address at the *Inaugural Global Congress on Sports and Christianity*, York St John University, UK, August, 2016.

⁶ Following the production of his 1992 anthology, Hoffman published a number of other papers (e.g., Hoffman, 1992a, 1992b, 1992c, 1999, and 2003).

⁷ For a review of Hoffman (2010a), see White (2012b).

which is essentially a representation of his life's work.⁸ Hoffman has been successful in disseminating his ideas in the media, regularly contributing to documentaries televised on networks such as CBS, ESPN, and Channel 4 in Britain, and to radio broadcasts for the BBC, CBS and NPR. Robert (Jack) Higgs, a chapter contributor to Hoffman's anthology, has also been a leading authority on the topic over the last three decades.

The first scholarly contribution of Higgs, a retired English literature professor at East Tennessee State University (USA), was a book which examined sport and religion (Christianity) in classic American literature (Higgs, 1981). This was followed by a review of philosophy and religion in sports that included an extensive bibliography (Higgs, 1982), and which was subsequently updated and revised (Deardorff, 2000). After publishing further related chapters and articles (e.g., Higgs, 1983, 1985, 1990), Higgs produced a monograph, *God in the Stadium: Sports and Religion in America* (Higgs, 1995), that was highly critical of the American sports institution, while championing the good of sport *per se*. This text has been widely cited in the related literature and has formed the basis of over 85 conference papers and invited presentations by Higgs. A co-authored book followed (Higgs and Braswell, 2004) that covered a wide-range of literary, theological, sociological and philosophical themes. Most recently, Higgs has written on archetypes and stereotypes in religion and American sports (Higgs, 2013).

Another prolific scholar in the field is Joseph L. Price. Price is Professor of Religious Studies at Whittier College

⁸ An article based on a chapter of Hoffman's (2010) book has been published in the periodical, *Christianity Today* (Hoffman, 2010b), whose current managing editor Mark Galli (2005, 2010) also has an interest in the topic. Hoffman (2012) contains a republished chapter from his book (Hoffman, 2010a).

(USA), and editor of the Mercer University Press book series on “Sports and Religion”. In 2001 he produced an edited text on the religious aspects of American sports and their manifestation as a civil or surrogate religion (Price, 2001a) and in 2006 authored a monograph entitled, *Rounding the Bases: Baseball and American Religion* (Price, 2006). While Price has published on a range of topics in the area (e.g., Price, 1984, 1991, 1994, 1996, 2001b, 2002, 2007), his corpus of work is more focussed and specific than the broad-ranging analysis of the sports and Christianity relationship provided by Hoffman and Higgs, in that his primary research interests are American baseball and football adopting mainstream sociological theories and the tools of religious studies to analyse his subject matter. In addition to Novak, Hoffman, Higgs and Price, two other scholars, William J. Baker and James Mathisen, have also made significant inroads into the scholarly investigation of the sport-faith relationship.

The major contribution of Baker, an emeritus historian at the University of Maine, (USA), is his scholarly and yet highly accessible socio-historical analysis of the American modern sports institution, *Playing with God* (Baker, 2007a). This was preceded by his provocatively entitled book, *If Christ Came to the Olympics* (Baker, 2000a) that is particularly useful for those wanting to critically analyse modern Olympia. He has also published on the socio-cultural movement of Victorian muscular Christianity (Baker, 2000b) and the historical relationship between western sports and religion (Baker, 1988, 2010). Similarly, a key area of interest for James Mathisen is that of muscular Christianity in American culture. A retired sociologist of religion at Wheaton College (USA), Mathisen has also published on Pauline athletic metaphors and the evolution and development of sports ministry organizations (Mathisen, 1990, 1994/2006, 1998, 2001, 2002, 2005). His co-authored book with Tony

Ladd, *Muscular Christianity: Evangelical Protestants and the Development of American Sport* (1999) is his most well-known, and for some practitioners of sports ministry, a controversial work. One of Mathisen's (1994/2006) earlier contributions on muscular Christianity was published in a book that comprised papers from the annual American conference of the *Christian Society for Kinesiology and Leisure Studies* (CSKLS) which, until recently, was the only professional scholarly organisation to focus on sport and the Christian faith (see Appendix A).

CSKLS was officially launched in 2002 but its roots go back to 1989 when Glen Van Andel, Professor of Recreation (now retired) at Calvin College, USA, founded the annual Symposium on Christianity and Leisure Studies. Tom Visker, Professor of Sport and Physical Education (Bethel College, USA) and Paul Heintzman, Professor of Leisure Studies (University of Ottawa, Canada) both attended the 1989 conference, and along with Van Andel, played key roles in the early development of this organization. In the early years of the annual symposium there was a focus on leisure and recreation studies, and the first collection of papers from the conferences entitled, *Christianity and Leisure: Issues in a Pluralistic Society* reflects this (see Heintzman, Van Andel, and Visker, 1994/2006). During the mid-1990s the overall scope of CSKLS extended to kinesiology⁹ stimulating a second collection of conference papers entitled, *Physical Education, Sports, and Wellness: Looking to God as we Look at Ourselves* (Byl and Visker, 1999). The significance of CSKLS as a pioneering organisation is further supported by the fact that both Hoffman (1994/2006) and Mathisen (1994/2006) have contributed chapters to these edited

⁹ Kinesiology is an American term and, broadly speaking, is synonymous in its usage with the disciplinary descriptors, "sports studies" and "sports sciences".

collections. Hoffman delivered invited keynote presentations at the 1991 and 2010 CSKLS conferences, while Mathisen has presented papers at the event on more than one occasion. With the recent launch of a professional journal, the *Journal of the Christian Society for Kinesiology and Leisure Studies* (2010-), CSKLS continues to be an important vehicle for research and scholarship in the field. The pioneering work of CSKLS and the scholars noted above (excluding Novak), have a strong protestant theological focus. However, this does not mean that the Catholic Church and community of scholars have not passionately engaged in reflecting upon sport and religion.¹⁰

Until recently, Novak's (1967/1994) influential book has stood alone as the only systematic analysis of sport and the catholic faith produced in the English language. That said, scholars from Germany, Italy and Poland have contributed to such debates in their own languages, often in the form of documents written at the national level by catholic bishops. More recently, however, there has been a growing number of academic texts (e.g., White, forthcoming; Baum and Coleman, 1989; Feeney, 2006, 1995; Kelly, 2012; Lixey et al., 2012; Lixey, 2012a, b; O'Gorman, 2010a; Ryan, 1986; Sing, 2004), empirical studies (Hastings and DelleMonache, 2007; Hastings *et al.*, 2006), scholarly essays,¹¹ practitioner

¹⁰ Kelly (2012: 204) has recently argued that "... Catholics are typically overlooked in books about the history of recreation, sport, and leisure in America". Kelly provides evidence for this claim by citing a number of major academic texts that do not mention catholic sports initiatives. From our own reading of, and engagement with, the study of sport over the last decade, we would support this argument. Also, see chapter 4, *Case Study (I): Sport and the Medieval Catholic Church* of Harvey (2014).

¹¹ These scholarly essays include: Bauer and Froissart (2011), Combeau-Mari (2011), Cronin (2000), Gems (1993), Hastings (2004), Kerrigan (1986), Koehlinger (2012a,b), McDevitt (1997), Maranise (2009), Martin

resources (Brown et al., 2006; Costantini and Lixey, 2011; Hess, 2012; Penrice, 2009; Yerkovich and Kelly, 2003) and periodical publications (see *New Catholic World*, 1986, July-August) focusing on the relationship between sport and the Catholic faith. These have undoubtedly been driven by the Pontificate of John Paul II which, we would argue, has been as significant for the catholic community as the body of work developed by the protestant thinkers described above.

Building on the work of his predecessor, Pope Pius XII, who addressed numerous catholic sport associations, John Paul II, who in his earlier life was a passionate sportsman, (i.e., football goalkeeper, skier and mountain climber, see Feeney, 2006, 1995), held two international sport gatherings in Rome's Olympic stadium speaking no less than 120 times on the subject, addressing Olympic committees and able/disabled athletes (Müller and Schäfer, 2010). The launch of the Church Sport Office within the Pontifical Council for the Laity¹² in 2004, led by Father Kevin Lixey, is arguably the most significant outcome of the long-held enthusiasm of the Holy See for sport, culminating in the pontificate of John Paul II. To date, this Office has held three international seminars at the Vatican, each of which has had a specific focus: (i) chaplaincy (ii) evangelism, and (iii) mission and education in sport. These events have resulted in the publication of three books (Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 2006, 2008, 2011). In addition, Pope Benedict XVI, while on a state visit to Great Britain (and in addition to his own reflections on the sports-world, see Clemens, 2009), launched *The John Paul II Foundation for Sport* (2008-), safeguarding the enduring legacy of his predecessor.

(2011), Mills (2002), Mirosław (2003), Munoz (2009), Nesti (2007c), Ryan (1985), Savant (2003), Sydnor (2009, 2006a, 2005) and Söll (1972).

¹² Papal teachings on sport are available on the website.

Most recently, the head of the ‘Culture and Sport’ section of the Pontifical Council for Culture at the Vatican, Msgr. Melchor Sanchez de Toca Alameda, has invited two high-profile American evangelical athletes, Tim Tebow (NFL football player) and Jeremy Lin¹³ (NBA basketball player), to attend an international conference on “re-instilling values in sports” (Glatz, 2013: 1; Christianity Today, 2012), alongside representatives from the *Italian National Olympic Committee*, *FIFA* and the *International Cycling Union*. A central historical motif of catholic discourse on sports and faith is the need to emphasise the joyful, festive and intrinsically playful nature of sport, a topic that is at the heart of the field and to which we now turn.

¹³ Kluck’s (2012) recent book provides an overview of the relationship between faith, and basketball and what commentators have called, “Linsanity”.