

Theology of Sport, Historical review

Rev Samuel Ashe was an 18th century English clergyman who clearly saw the need for interaction between church and sport. He used to spend his Sunday afternoons hiding in the trees by the local sports field. He would bide his time till the football came near him when he would catch the ball and pierce it with a pin¹. He could then go home rejoicing that he had stopped his parishioners from sinning! As the day progresses, I hope that we will reach a more helpful relationship between sport and Christianity.

Introduction

Jim Mathisen, a sociologist at Wheaton College and joint author of the influential book *Muscular Christianity*², has written, "The fact that the current [sports ministry] movement still operates in the absence of any clearly articulated theology of sport is troubling". [He continues] "no theology or hermeneutics is broadly shared within the movement"³.

Writing the preface to *The Image of God in the human body*, James K. A. Smith asks: "where can we find sustained theological reflection on sport? I don't mean 'religious' reflections by athletes - which are usually testimonials that simply instrumentalize sport as a means for sharing a message about a wholly other-worldly, disembodied 'gospel' (and which tend to also be remarkably unreflective and uncritical about the nature of sport as industry in our culture)". Smith makes a simple but unequivocal statement "we lack a robust theology of sport"⁴.

Smith refers to reflections by athletes. There is a plethora of low quality devotional sports material available.

The result of this vacuum is that sports ministry proceeds without any underlying theology or redemptive critique of it⁵.

One of the earliest references to a Christian view of sport came in 1364 when the Synod of Ely forbade its clergy to play games, and some years later the Prior of Lilleshall, issuing moral guidance, urged parish priests not to cast stones or "axle" trees and to banish games from their churchyards.⁶

Early Fathers

There are a number of references to sport and games in the writings of the Early Church Fathers. Tertullian, for example, commented: "In times past, equestrian skill was simply a matter of riding on horseback, and certainly no guilt was involved in the ordinary use of the horse. But when this skill was pressed into the service of the games it was changed from a gift of God into an instrument of demons"⁷.

¹ R.Holt, *Sport and the British*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1989) Page 39

² Tony Ladd and James Mathisen, *Muscular Christianity*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books 1999)

³ Jim Mathisen, *A brief history of Christianity and Spory*, in Donald Deardorff II and John White (Ed), *The Image of God in the Human Body*, (Lewiston, NY, Edwin Mellen), 2008, Page 34

⁴ The Image of God, Page iii.

⁵ Jim Mathisen in *The Image of God*, 2008, Page 30

⁶ John Mirc, *Instructions for Parish Priests*, 1403, [1902 edn , ed E Peacock, London, Page 11], quoted in D Birley, *Sport and the Making of Britain*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 1993, Page 43.

⁷ RB Ballon, *Analysis of the writings of selected Church Fathers to A.D. 394 to reveal attitudes regarding physical activity*, in EF Zeigler, ed, *History of sport and physical education to 1900:* , (Champaign, Ill., Stipes), 1973, Page 195

Baker notes that Tertullian insisted, that the Roman Games had originated as pagan festivals encouraged immoral gambling and prostitution and thrived on a cruel “misuse of God's creation by God's creatures⁸.”

Tomás Bolaño⁹ says that “the earliest Christians understood that these athletic practices kept the content of pagan religions, already superseded by Christian spirituality.”

Whatever they did the Early Church Fathers did not develop a systematic theology of sport.

The Puritans

Philip Stubbes (c1555 – c1610), saw football as a “a friendly kind of fight” and “this murdering play”¹⁰ and wondering about the appropriateness of football for Christians, asking “Is this a Christian dealing for one brother to mayme and hurt another and that upon prepped malice and set purpose?”¹¹ Mason’s assessment is that the Christian conscience played a significant role in changing attitudes to football and that “the final nail in the coffin of rough football probably lay in the attitude of so many evangelicals towards games”.¹²

Dennis Brailsford¹³ has argued that we owe a debt to the Puritans as they were the first Christians to think seriously about sport, even if most of their thoughts about sport were negative. Brailsford further comments on the state of modern sport that “the foul language, obscene chanting, overt racism and physical violence found in some crowds is exactly the mass behaviour which the whole Puritan tradition rejected”.¹⁴

You have probably heard Mencken’s witty comment that Puritans were tortured by “the haunting fear that someone, somewhere might be happy”¹⁵.

Allen Guttmann has written that he was “not aware of a single document in which a Puritan minister or magistrate demonstrates any enthusiasm for sports per se.”¹⁶

Puritan opposition to sport might be summarized under three points:

- 1 Sport was not the best use of time;
- 2 Sport often took place on Sunday;
- 3 Sport was often associated with drinking, gambling and bad company.¹⁷

Ladd and Mathisen suggest that in the 19th and 20th century, those criticisms were still a fair summary of the Christian view of sport.

Steven Overman’s new book¹⁸ argues that the Protestant Ethic is a significant influence on modern American sport. The Puritans saw play generally as time which could be better

⁸ William J Baker *Sports in the Western World*, , Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1988, Page 39

⁹ Tomás Bolaño, *Can we be athletes for God like the first Christians?*, Paper presented to the Inaugural International Conference on Sport and Spirituality, at York St John’s University, 28-31 August 2007

¹⁰ Philip Stubbs, *Anatomie of Abuses*, 1583, quoted in *British Sport, a Social History*, Dennis Brailsford , (Cambridge, Lutterworth Press), 1998 Page 30

¹¹ *Anatomie of Abuses*, quoted in Morris Marples, *A History of football* (London Secker and Warburg,, 1954) Page 54

¹² Tony Mason, *Association Football and English Society 1863-1915*, Harvester, 1980, Page 10

¹³ , D Brailsford, *Puritanism and sport in seventeenth century England* in *Stadion: Journal of the history of sport and physical education* 1(2), 1975, Page 329

¹⁴ Dennis Brailsford, *Sport, time and Society*, (London Routledge), 1991, Page 25

¹⁵ Alistair Cooke, HL Mencken, *The vintage Menchem*, Vintage Books NY, 1955 P65, quoted in Robert J Higgs, *Muscular Christianity, Holy Play, and Spiritual Exercises: Confusion about Christ*, Robert J Higgs, *Arete* 1(1), (Fall 1983): 59-85. Page 78

¹⁶ Allen Guttmann , *A Whole New Ball Game: An Interpretation of American Sports.*, Al Chapel Hill, N.C: University of North Carolina Press, 1988., Page 33

¹⁷ D Brailsford *Sport and Society*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), 1969, Page 132-3

spent. Overman starts his book with four fundamental questions, one of which is: “Why do Americans feel guilty when they play for the fun of it?”¹⁹ Overman argues that John Calvin’s ghost still haunts the sports arenas and the playgrounds²⁰.

I read a great phrase in Overman “soap-swimming Presbyterians”, which implied that recreational bathers took a bar of soap along so that time spent swimming was not time wasted.

Muscular Christianity

Thomas Hughes’s novel, *Tom Brown’s School Days*, published in 1857 certainly had great influence. Hughes’s philosophy is perhaps best summed up in the sequel *Tom Brown at Oxford*, Hughes spelt out his philosophy more clearly, referring to “the old chivalrous and Christian belief, that a man’s body is given him to be trained and brought under subjection, and then used for the protection of the weak, the advancement of all righteous causes and the subduing of the earth which God has given to the children of men”.²¹

How do you sum up the theology of Muscular Christianity in a few sentences? The process of summing up the essence of Muscular Christianity is further complicated because, as Derek Birley puts it, “Hughes used ‘British’, ‘sporting’, ‘courageous’, ‘manly’, ‘Christian’ and ‘gentlemanly’ as if they were synonymous or at least aspects of the same basic virtue”.²² One legacy of Muscular Christianity and the development of sport in and from the Public Schools is the expectation of sportsmanship.

According to Clifford Putney: “Muscular Christianity can be defined simply as a Christian commitment to health and manliness. Its origins can be traced back to the New Testament, which sanctions manly exertion (Mark 11:15) and physical health (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)”.²³

Thomas Arnold (1795-1842) believed in a highly ascetic brand of Christianity. “Doing one’s duty” was high on his list of virtues. It was also a “this world”²⁴ brand of Christianity, which saw Rugby School as an institution for training Christian gentlemen. The value of it was in channelling and dispersing those boyish energies (particularly sexual energies) in more wholesome ways or simply keeping the boys out of mischief and in developing team spirit and character.

To sum up there is very little in Muscular Christianity which could be described as contributing to a systematic theology of sport.

Victorian period

The late 19th century saw the establishment of many football teams by churches²⁵, some of which developed into Aston Villa, QPR, Tottenham Hotspur, Liverpool and Everton²⁶. But

¹⁸ Steven J. Overman. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Sport, How Calvinism and Capitalism Shaped America’s Games*, , Macon, Mercer University Press, 2011

¹⁹ The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Sport, Page 3

²⁰ The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Sport, Page 41

²¹ Thomas Hughes, *Tom Brown at Oxford*, 1869, {London, Penguin 1971} Pages 112-13

²² Sport and the Making of Britain, Page 210

²³ Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, (Harvard, Harvard University Press), Page 11

²⁴ E Dunning, and K Sheard, *Barbarians, Gentlemen and Players: a Sociological study of development of Rugby Football*, (Oxford: Martin Robertson), 1979, Page 72

²⁵ DD Molyneux, *The development of Physical recreation in the Birmingham district from 1871 to 1892*, MA Thesis University of Birmingham 1957

²⁶ Peter Lupson, Thank God for Football, (London SPCK), 2006

this was more a pragmatic development than one based on a well-thought out theology of sport.

The Evangelical view of sport in this period was generally negative, Bishop JC Ryle, (1816-1900) for example, had been cricket captain of Eton, triple Oxford Blue. He took 10 wickets v Cambridge in 1836. However he never played cricket after ordination. His attitude is summed up in his *Who's Who* entry which records his interests as "cricket until ordained".

The history of Welsh Rugby shows a similar divide between evangelicals and the liberal churches. There were three future Anglican clergymen in the first ever Welsh XV of 1881. Rugby was, however, frowned upon by Welsh non-conformists, largely because of its association with the demon drink.

Non-conformists were "discouraged from playing by the ghoulish warning that they were kicking the head of John the Baptist - a prevalent and widespread belief".²⁷ One Welsh minister denouncing sport and other amusements decreed that if "men wished to frequent pubs, theatres and football then let them, in the name of the living God, remain outside the Christian pale".²⁸

CT Studd is another example. Described by WG Grace as, "the most brilliant member of a well-known cricketing family and from 1881-84 had few superiors as an all round player"²⁹ Studd's test career lasted but 6 months before he gave up to devote his life to foreign missionary work.

Lord Arthur Kinnaird (1847-1923)³⁰ was an outstanding football player and administrator. He played in nine FA Cup Finals between 1873 and 1883 for Wanderers and Old Etonians, gaining five winners' medals. A funeral tribute delivered by Rev NK Mackenzie said that his life "bore testimony to what the grace of God can effect in a human heart". He continued that his religion "was of the evangelical type but it was not the narrow sort of evangelicalism which looks with disapproval on the common interests of men and women".³¹ Perhaps that says as much about contemporary evangelicalism as it does about Kinnaird!

In 1892, Hodder published a booklet entitled *Baxter's Second Innings*³², the account of two innings by a young cricketer. The purpose and content of the booklet are however much more an analogy for the Christian life than about cricket. Another presentation of the Christian life through the terminology of cricket was published in about 1910³³, *The Cricket Field of the Christian Life*. While neither contributes much to the theology of sport, it is of interest that such things were being written at this time.

²⁷ David Smith and Gareth Williams, *Fields of Praise : the official history of the Welsh Rugby Union 1881-1981*, (Cardiff University of Wales Press,) 1980., Page 6

²⁸ *Fields of Praise*, Page 101

²⁹ Patrick Scott, *Cricket and the religious world of the Victorian Period*, *The Church Quarterly*, 3 (1970), Page 137. Norman Grubb, *CT Studd: Cricketer and missionary*, (Cambridge Lutterworth), 1970.

³⁰ The author is grateful to Peter Lupson for helping him to locate much of the material on Lord Kinnaird

³¹ *The Perthshire Constitutional and Journal*, 7 February 1923

³² Henry Drummond, *Baxter's Second Innings*, (London, Hodder), 1892, page 19

³³ Thomas Waugh, *The Cricket field of the Christian life*, Stockport, nd. The book, has no publication date but refers to one of the author's previous books which the Bodleian catalogue lists as 1908.

Paul's epistles

A popular starting point to construct a theology of sport is the so-called athletic metaphors in Paul's letters. There have been at least seven theses on the athletic metaphors.³⁴ and attempts have been made to justify sports ministry or develop a theology of sport. However, none has proved satisfactory and most have concluded that when Paul likens the Christian to an athlete in 2 Timothy 2:5, he is no more trying to write a theology of sport, than is he reflecting theologically on agriculture or war and peace when he compares the Christian to the farmer and soldier in the adjoining verses.

Similarly there have been studies on the concept of Agon (competition) as used in the New Testament³⁵ but this takes us very little further in our quest for the Holy Grail of a theological understanding of sport.

In any case we are dealing with about 9 New Testament words with a sporting connotation – not a lot on which to build a theology of sport.

Play

The Theology of play is an area in which more has been written³⁶. I have to confess that this section is the weakest part of my paper as I have simply not read as much as I should have in this area. Jürgen Moltmann argues that creation was not necessary but God chose to do it and was able to enjoy it. He continues, "Like the creation, man's games are an expression of freedom and not of caprice, for playing relates to the joy of the creator with his creation and the pleasure of the player with his game".

Moltmann also answers the Puritans' question, "'But can believers play? Don't they have more important things to do?' Games always presuppose innocence. Only the innocent, namely children, or those liberated from guilt, namely the beloved, are able to play. The guilty man is at odds with himself. He has lost his spontaneity and cannot play well. Because he disagrees with himself, wavering between self-assertion and self-hatred, he is neither a good loser nor a good winner"³⁷.

Incidentally Steven Overman³⁸ starts his recent book with 4 questions: Why do Americans feel guilty when they play for the fun of it? Why must we infuse games with high moral purpose? Why

³⁴ Keith D Caplet, *1Corinthians and the athletic terminology of Paul*, MA thesis, Western Conservative Baptist Seminary (OR), 1981; Peter D Chiofalo, *The athletic metaphor and the role of self-discipline in sanctification*, ThM thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1992; Walter E Henderson Jr, *Paul's use of Athletic imagery*, New Orleans Baptist Seminary, 1996; Kendall M Weekes, *The athletic and military metaphors of the Apostle Paul in the Philippian Epistle*, ThM thesis, Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, (OR), 1994; Carl E DeVries, *Pauline athletic terminology*, MA thesis, Wheaton College, 1944; John T Somerville, *A study of the relationship between athletic illustrations in the Pauline writings and the athletic by the Apostle Paul (40-60 AD)*, MA Thesis, East Carolina University, 1969; Dean A Vieselmeyer, *Dean A, St Paul's application of athletic metaphors to the Christian life: an exegetical study of 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, Galatians 2:2, Philippians 2:14-16, Philippians 3:13-14, and 2 Timothy 4:6-8*, MDiv, Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield IL, 1974

³⁵ Victor C. Pfitzner, *Paul and the Agon Motif Traditional Athletic Imagery in the Pauline Literature*, Ph.D. Evangelical Theological Seminary, 1964; Victor C Pfitzner, *Paul and the Agon Motif. Traditional Athletic Imagery in the Pauline Literature*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1967.

³⁶ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: a study in play*, (Boston: Beacon, 1944 and 1955). (Republished Routledge and Keagan Paul 1980); Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of play*, (New York, Harper and Row), 1972; DL Miller, *Gods and games: toward a theology of play*, (Cleveland, Ohio: World Publishing) 1970; Robert K Johnston, *The Christian at Play*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 1983; Shirl Hoffman, *Steps Toward a Christian Perspective of Play*, In C. Brownlee, Ed. Faith and Discipline. Ed. C. (Sterling, KS: Sterling College), 1980.

³⁷ Theology of play, Pages 31-32

³⁸ *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Sport*, Page 3

have we turned sports into rational goal-directed, work-infused activities? And why is winning so important?

The philosopher of sport, Scott Kretchmar, recently made a quite provocative comment in this area: “The church, theologians, and laypersons, at least in the Judeo-Christian heritage, have long had difficulty figuring out what to do with play and games. Should they be embraced as ends in themselves, exploited for theological purposes, actively avoided or simply ignored? ... To put matters clearly and bluntly, does God put God’s stamp of approval on such activities or not”. He continues: “Have we spent too much time on “theologies of play” when a “theology of games” might be just as sensible? I believe that dualistic tendencies have in fact, had these kinds of impacts”³⁹.

Susan Saint Sing in *The energy of play* asks if as we believe “we are created in the likeness of God, does God play? Does he play with us?” She ends her essay with the words, “Play matters, so play as if it matters”⁴⁰.

Roman Catholic approach

There has been arguably more Catholic thinking about sport than you would find in evangelical circles. Pope Pius X – who was Pope 1903-14 - declared: “Young people should perform physical exercises. Performed in moderation they will not only promote the health of the body, but also the salvation of the soul”⁴¹.

The German theologian Fritz Walter in 1910 was writing about physical exercise as morally important and pointing to the fundamental Biblical data on which the dignity of the human body is based: man created in the image of God, man’s Duty to glorify God in the body, the appearance of the Saviour in human shape. The destiny of man to be glorified at the last day even in the body⁴².

Another German theologian who was ahead of his time was Anton Koch, who wrote in 1910, “A sport which is not content to accomplish something good and beautiful, to provide amusement and edification, but instead seeks victory, triumph and admiration at all costs is in itself reprehensible”⁴³. As I read that I was reminded of Krattenmaker⁴⁴ berating evangelicals in a book published exactly 100 years later for not challenging the obsession with winning in modern professional sport.

Koch’s attitude to sport has been described as “typical of the subsequent attitude of Catholic theologians: acceptance in principle, warnings against overvaluation of sport and ... emphasis on the spiritual and moral effects of sport”⁴⁵.

Gustave Thils, in 1955 wrote of the need for “theology of the body and of sport”⁴⁶ (p. 91). But his subsequent writings applied theology in several directions but not to sport. Pius XII, Pope from 1939-58, who from his youth right up to his old age took part in sport, commented

³⁹ Scott Kretchmar, *Why Dichotomies Make It Difficult to See Games as Gifts of God* in Jim Parry, Mark Nesti and Nick Watson, Ed, *Theology, Ethics and Transcendence in Sport*, Edited by, Routledge, London 2010. Page 189 and 191

⁴⁰ Susan Saint Sing, *The energy of play*, in *Theology, Ethics and Transcendence in Sport*, pages 207 and 209

⁴¹ Georg Soell, *Sport in Catholic Theology in the 20th Century*, in Ommo Grupe et al, Ed, *The Scientific view of sport*, (New York, Springer Verlag) 1972, Page 63

⁴² Franz Walter, *Der Leib und sein Recht im Christentum*, (Donauwörth, Auer), 1910

⁴³ Anton Koch, 1910, p. 237 [Not sure of book title]

⁴⁴ Tom Krattenmaker, *Onward Christian Athletes (Turning Ballparks into pulpits and players into Preachers)*, (Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield), 2010, Page 201ff

⁴⁵ *Sport in Catholic Theology in the 20th Century*, Page 63

⁴⁶ Gustave Thils, 1955, Page 91 [Not sure of book title]

on Sunday sport and sport for women and argued that without the soul, sport is merely a movement of the limbs⁴⁷.

That seems an important if obvious point that the concept of the spiritual takes sport beyond the physical. I was reminded of a line from John Eldredge⁴⁸, "The naked woman's body is a portion of eternity too great for the eye of man". Is there a sense in which we can see in great sport a glimpse of eternity?

On another occasion addressing a group of athletes, Pius XII applied St. Paul's exhortation, "Whether you eat or drink, whatever it is that you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31) to all physical activity and this consequently includes sport⁴⁹.

Pope John Paul II (Pope 1978-2005) spoke on sport 120 times once emphasizing the subsidiary role of sports in God's creative plan⁵⁰ and that "Athletic activity can help every man and woman to recall that moment when God the Creator gave origin to the human person, the masterpiece of his creative work⁵¹". John Paul also once said that he did not believe in praying for victory but had made an exception when Poland played Germany in the World Cup.

Benedict XVI, speaking on the occasion of the 2006 Winter Olympics, expressed the need for the incarnate Word, the light of the world to, "enlighten every dimension of humanity, including sport. There is nothing human, save sin, which the Son of God by becoming flesh, has not valorised... sport is one of the human activities which is also waiting to be enlightened by God through Christ, so that the values it expresses may be purified and elevated at both the individual and the collective levels⁵²".

In 2006 The Vatican held a seminar on sport. The proceedings were subsequently published.⁵³ One contributor noted that there had been over 200 discourses on sport, from simple greetings, to more elaborate speeches, by the pontiffs of the 20th century⁵⁴. One of the conclusions of the gathering was an agreement as to the need for the elaboration of a Christian vision of sport⁵⁵.

The Vatican organized a further seminar in 2007⁵⁶, this time with an emphasis on pastoral issues. Some of the quotes from the proceedings evoke a loud amen.

"the world of sport can best be transformed from within by the testimony of sports men and women who profoundly live their faith in Jesus Christ⁵⁷".

⁴⁷ Sport in Catholic Theology in the 20th Century, page 71/72

⁴⁸ John Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, (Nashville, Thomas Nelson), 2001, Page 93

⁴⁹ Pius XII Address to Roman athletes, 20 May 1945

⁵⁰ Conference of Sports and Ethics: Sports can be viewed as service to mankind. "L'Osservatore Romano" Weekly English Edition, n. 2, January 1990,5.

⁵¹ John Paul II, Address to participants of Athletic Champ : Be examples of human virtues, "L'Osservatore Romano" Weekly English Edition, n. 36, September 7, 1987, 5.

⁵² " " Benedict XVI, Message for the 20th Winter Olympic Games in Turin, Italy: A light for sports, "L'Osservatore Romano" Weekly English Edition, n. 6, February 8,2006,2.

⁵³ *The World of sport today: A field of Christian mission*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2006

⁵⁴ Carlo Mazza, *Sport as viewed from the Church's Magisterium*, in *The World of sport today*Page 57. He gives the following summary of the discourses:: Pius X, 5; Benedict XV 1 Pius XI,); Pius XII, 20; John XXIII, 9; Paul VI, 5; John Paul II, 120. Page 57.

⁵⁵ *The World of sport today*, Page 82

⁵⁶ *Sport an Educational and Pastoral challenge: Seminar of study on the theme of sport chaplains* Vatican, 7-8 September 2007 Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2008

⁵⁷ Stanislaw Card, in *Sport an Educational and Pastoral challenge*, Page 11

"an appeal for a greater theological appreciation and grounding of the vast and complex phenomenon of sport is much desired" and "The 'world of sport' is ever more in need of a 'sports culture orientated by Christian principles' as we firmly believe that only a well inspired 'culture' can impact sport with Christian values⁵⁸".

"Sport can only escape from this crisis imposed upon it by the 'dictatorship of relativism' only if the world of sport learns how to open up to God, the only one who can guarantee the authentic values of life and human relations⁵⁹".

The proceedings of the seminar includes a 4 page section entitled "A theological foundation" which is developed under three headings:

- the phenomenon of the body,
- the human person and
- creation in the image of God.

The author believes that "sport assumes a unique and singular importance, that of 'manifesting' the glory of God⁶⁰".

A 2009 book *Saving Sport*⁶¹ looked promising only to disappoint. While there was a section entitled redeeming sport, it included no theology.

Recent Evangelical contributions

As I studied the literature in preparing this paper, I was struck by how few times I came across the phrase "Theology of sport". I only found one paper using that phrase in the title, an unpublished conference paper by Jim Mathisen. Most of the paper is taken up with an analysis – Mathisen is a sociologist, not a theologian – of what he calls modern Muscular Christianity or in other words the American, evangelical sports ministry movement. Mathisen states that "If the original myth of Muscular Christianity was manliness, morality and health, the modern one is pragmatic utility, meritocratic democracy, competitive virtue, heroic models and therapeutic self-control". To spell that out further Mathisen⁶² identifies 5 elements of the modern myth:

Pragmatic utility—the worth of sport is essentially determined by its utilitarian effectiveness as a means to Christian conversion;

Meritocratic democracy-the meritocratic nature of American sports is an appropriate model for the democratic appeal of muscular Christianity;

Competitive virtue-competition and winning are consistent with the teachings of Jesus and the writings of the apostle Paul;

Heroic models-sport provides the predominant context for the heroes and role models American youth need, especially as a demonstration of Christianity's continuing relevance; and

Therapeutic self-control-improved performance in sport is possible when one follows a disciplined regimen to achieve a level of self-control, like a mature Christian.

⁵⁸ Carlo Mazza, in *Sport an Educational and Pastoral challenge* Page 55

⁵⁹ Josef Clemens *Sport an Educational and Pastoral challenge* Page 83

⁶⁰ *Sport an Educational and Pastoral challenge*, Page 39

⁶¹ Kevin O'Gorman, *Saving Sport (Sport, society and spirituality)*, (Dublin, The Columba Press), 2009.

⁶² Jim Mathisen *Towards a Biblical theology of sport*, , Paper presented to the annual meeting of the Association for Christianity, Sport, Leisure and Health, Wheaton, June 2002, Pages 10-11

Mathisen's paper is interesting but stops at the point where one might have liked him to start by arguing for the need to develop "a systematic theology of sport...[beginning] with broad topics including revelation, the person of God, the nature of the human person, the church, and other essential categories [and locating] insights about sport under those headings"⁶³.

Shane Groth wrote a short paper on The Theology of Volleyball⁶⁴ in which he argued that as many Biblical concepts emerge from playing volleyball as from a "well-constructed sermon or Bible Study". His conclusion is that we must not be too competitive and that it is more important to involve all players in a game than to win.

I have to confess to writing an article myself on the Theology of Cycling, picking up a comment by the Bishop of Manchester who in 1902 blamed the decline in Sunday observance on three things: "carelessness and athleticism, and particularly on the invention of the bicycle"⁶⁵.

In 1988 Peter Ballantine's Grove booklet, *Sport, the Opiate of the People*⁶⁶, included a four page section under the heading "Can we erect a theology of sport?" He noted that the Bible has a high view of the human body, that Paul saw value in using analogies for the Christian life from the world of sport argued for a Christian prophetic ministry to sport.

One of the earliest Christian books on sport in the modern era was Wes Neal's *Handbook of athletic perfection*⁶⁷. It is a handbook on how to be a Christian athlete. Neal was very much ahead of his time in his thinking but the nearest to a theology of sport would be his four headings in the introduction:

- A person is to remain in that same condition as he was in when he became a Christian. [ie stay in sport]
- The talents you have been given are from God and are designed for a purpose.
- An athlete has a built-in platform for sharing the good news of Jesus Christ.
- You will understand more clearly how to apply God's Word to your non-athletic world as you apply it to your athletic performance⁶⁸.

In 1985 Bradley Bailey wrote a Master's thesis on the *Bible and Sport*⁶⁹. The thesis addresses two main questions:

Does Biblical teaching endorse sports activities?

What is the value of bodily exercise according to the Bible?

His conclusion is that the Biblical texts "neither endorse or prohibit sport participation... [but] only illustrate spiritual truth, we cannot turn to these passages to develop a theology of sport"⁷⁰.

A recent internet paper by Lee J Smith is entitled *Sports a Biblical Perspective*⁷¹ – the author is clearly well-read and a man of good judgement as he quotes me. In a section entitled "Towards a theology of sport", he makes 16 points which include the following statements:

⁶³ *Towards a Biblical theology of sport, Page 29*

⁶⁴ Shane M Groth, *Theology of volleyball*, , Lutheran Forum, 21:2, 1987, Page 30

⁶⁵ Freewheeling to heaven? The theology of the bicycle, at <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/faith/article2099901.ece> and <http://www.veritesport.org/?page=freewheeling>

⁶⁶ Peter Ballantine, *Sport, the Opiate of the People*, , Grove Ethical Study No 70, 1988

⁶⁷ Wes Neal, *Handbook of athletic perfection*, (Grand Island, Cross Training), 1981.

⁶⁸ Handbook of athletic perfection, pages xi-xiii

⁶⁹ Bradley D Bailey, *The Bible and Sport: Friend or Foe*, MDiv Thesis, Grace Theological Seminary (IN), 1985

⁷⁰ Bradley D Bailey, Page iii

⁷¹ Sports - A Biblical Perspective, Lee J. Smith at http://www.randolphefree.org/sports_-_a_biblical_perspective.htm

- Athletic abilities are a gift from God;
- Sin has distorted our desire for pleasure;
- Sport may or may not teach Biblical values;
- Believers are no more likely to be successful than unbelievers;
- God is more concerned with our character than our results

He also lists ten responsibilities of the Christian (eg becoming more like Jesus, being a good father/mother/parent, studying the Bible) and adds “all of these priorities supersede involvement in sport”.

My own book, *What the Bible says about sport*⁷², included a chapter “Towards a theology of sport”, in which I started with creation, then the fall, judgment and redemption. I concluded that any theology of sport must include these elements. Sport is...

- a gift from God
- part of God’s creation
- an opportunity for worship
- an opportunity to love one’s neighbour
- a testing ground
- an opportunity for witness
- important but not all-important
- not the source of our significance as people

Sport as worship of God is well encapsulated in the scene from the film *Chariots of Fire*, when Eric Liddell’s thoughts as he runs are, ‘God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast and when I run, I feel his pleasure.’ More and more Christians have come to see sport, played with the right attitude, as something that can bring pleasure to God. Shame that the line was actually written by Colin Welland, rather than spoken by Eric Liddell.

Lowrie McCown and Val Gin similarly start with creation when they seek to answer the question “What does the Bible have to say about sport?” in a chapter entitled “A Biblical Perspective of Sport”. They group their argument under the following headings:

- All Things were Created by Him and for Him
- God’s Perfect Plan for Creation
- Broken Boundaries and Broken Relationships
- God’s Solution: Restoration through Redemption in Christ
- Restoration of Sport through the Hearts of Sportspeople.⁷³

The most important book to be published in this area is *The Image of God in the Human Body*⁷⁴. Consisting of 15 chapters by 17 authors, the book arose from a think-tank, which we organized in Ohio in 2005. The topics covered include play, competition, idolatry, practising the presence of God in sport and sport as a profession. The book’s diversity is its strength and its weakness in that it covers ground from many perspectives but does not hone in on an agreed theology of sport.

That the *New Dictionary of Christian Apologetics*⁷⁵, included an entry on sport was encouraging and surprising – that they asked me to write the article, even more surprising.

⁷² Stuart Weir, *What the Bible says about sport*, (Oxford: BRF), 2000

⁷³ Lowrie McCown and Val Gin, *Focus on sport in ministry*, (Marietta, GA, 360 Sports) 2003, Pages 33-50.

⁷⁴ Donald Deardorff II and John White (Ed), *The Image of God in the Human Body*, (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen), 2008.

⁷⁵ *New Dictionary of Christian Apologetics*, (Leicester, Inter Varsity Press), 2006

Incidentally, I recall having several battles with the editor who wanted the article to be negatively disposed to sport.

Stephen Altrogge⁷⁶ writes of sport as a gift from God, that our talent comes from God, that we should seek to bring God glory through our involvement in sport rather than being concerned with our own glory and that as “Christians we are commanded to be like Jesus Christ in every facet of our lives, including the way we play sports”.

While not representing a systematic theology two other important books are Ashley Null's *Real Joy*⁷⁷ and Derek de la Peña's *Scripture and Sport Psychology*⁷⁸.

Apologetic for sports ministry

Tom Krattenmaker states that American Christians are “treating sports as a vehicle for advancing the evangelical message” and “a highly visible venue to promote the faith⁷⁹”. This is what Youth for Christ described as the “sports appeal”. This has led to several versions of what might be called “Biblical apologetics for sports ministry”.

The Church Sports group of the International Sports Coalition has produced a leaflet called, “A theological basis for sports ministry in the church”. There is a reference to creation and incarnation, then the statement that the fields in the modern world which are “ripe for harvest” are the sports fields. Then with reference to discipline, discovering and training talents, teamwork, personal accomplishment, achieving team goals, adjustment for effectiveness and building character, we are told “Sport is used as a metaphor for spiritual accomplishment in Paul's writing. Sport is more than a metaphor – it is a training tool for spiritual maturity...In other words the characteristics built in sports are useful for ministry inside and outside of sports”.

The title is “A theological basis for sports ministry in the church “ Did I miss something?

Writing under the title of *Biblical Foundations of Sports Ministry*⁸⁰, Rodger Oswald starts with the argument from silence. “While the Bible is silent regarding television, it is not silent about the principle of a transformed mind (Rom 12:2) or the wise use of time (Eph5:16). By the same token, biblical principles are germane to the propriety of sport and recreation ministry, while carrying out the mandates of Christ”.

“Therefore if something were inherently evil or sinful about sports, a holy God would not have used sports or athletics as a metaphor for the Christian experience. While the Bible is silent, the use of sporting metaphors clearly indicates that God has no problem with sports, otherwise he would have added a caveat when those comparisons were made in Corinthians, Hebrews and 2 Timothy”

Most of the rest of chapter is about evangelism through sport.

Bryan Mason starts with image and relationship from Genesis and before quoting “what has become a classic verse for sports ministry of any kind..’I have become all things to all men so that by all means I might save some (1 Corinthians 1:22)⁸¹”.

⁷⁶ Stephen Altrogge, *Game Day for the Glory of God*, (Wheaton, Crossway), 2008

⁷⁷ J Ashley Null, *Real Joy*, (Stuttgart, Germany Hanssler), 2004.

⁷⁸ Derek de la Peña, *Scripture and sport psychology* (New York, iUniverse), 2004.

⁷⁹ Onward Christian Athletes, Page 15 and 186.

⁸⁰ Rodger Oswald, *Biblical Foundations of Sports Ministry* in John Garner (Ed), *Recreation and Sports Ministry*, (Nashville Broadman and Holman Publishers), 2003, Pages 30 and 34

⁸¹ Bryan Mason, *Into the stadium*, (Milton Keynes Spring Harvest and Authentic Publishing), 2003

Steve Connor's principles and practice for successful sports ministry has a section "Biblical Foundations"⁸² but it is really foundations for ministry with no real Biblical engagement with sport.

There have been attempts to link Biblical events to sports competition including Nelson Price's reference to the temptation of Jesus as the 'Wilderness Games' "which showed Jesus to be a competitor of discernment, diligence and dedication"⁸³.

Others portray Jesus as a sporting superstar: "I firmly believe that if Jesus Christ was sliding into second base, he would knock the second baseman into left field to break up the double play. Christ might not throw a spitball but he would play hard within the rules."⁸⁴ The film *Elmer Gantry* referred to Jesus Christ as "the greatest quarterback who ever lived."⁸⁵ Dave Dravechy, pitcher for the San Francisco Giants, said: "If I could put Jesus Christ into my shoes he would be the most aggressive and intense performer on the field. He would win every time."⁸⁶ All these rather fit into what Frank Deford called "sportianity"⁸⁷

Alex Ribeiro's *Who won the World Cup*⁸⁸ is a kind of Liberation Theology meets sports ministry. The book was the inside story of Brazil's triumph in the 1994 Football World Cup in USA. The answer at the end of the book to the question of who won the World Cup is: "It was very clear that the producer of the 1994 World Cup drama was God himself... Although he had not been seen in person at the Rose Bowl, at the closing ceremony, or at any of the other 52 games, everything—absolutely everything—was under his control. God left his mark on every detail. And since he does not share his glory with anyone, the decisive play didn't have anything to do with Baggio's [who missed the deciding penalty kick for Italy] feet or Tafferel's [Brazilian goalkeeper's] hands. Unseen, but real, God won the 1994 World Cup".

The book tells the inside story of Alex's meetings with the Christian players, the Bible studies and their discussions. The team had a growing conviction that winning the World Cup was part of God's plan for them.

When Leonardo was sent off against USA, leaving Brazil to play with ten men, this was interpreted in relation to Gideon's victory over the Midianites with only 300 of his original 32,000 soldiers (see Judges 7). God caused Brazil to win with ten men so that it would not be seen as a victory due to human ability.

Why has there been so little work in the area of theology of sport?

I will finish with a few thoughts of why there has been so little theological thinking on sport. Georg Soell⁸⁹ suggests a concern about How does theology come legitimately, i.e. without overstepping its boundaries, to broach the theme of sport

Jim Mathisen⁹⁰ suggests that sports ministry organizations "have been primarily about evangelism" and not interested in theological thinking. Mathisen quotes Nathan Hatch⁹¹,

⁸² Steve Connor, *Sports Outreach: principles and practice for successful sports ministry*, (Tain, Christian Focus Publications) 2003

⁸³ Nelson Price, Jesus the competitor, *The Christian Athlete*, February 1976, Pages 9 and 10.

⁸⁴ Fritz Petersen, quoted by Carol Flake in *Redemptoriana: culture, politics and the New Evangelicalism*, (New York), 1984 Page 101

⁸⁵ *Redemptoriana: culture, politics and the New Evangelicalism*, page 93

⁸⁶ Bill Glass, *See also Expect to Win*, (Word Books, Texas), 1981.

⁸⁷ Frank Deford, *Religion in Sport*, in *Sports Illustrated* 19 April, 26 April and 3 May 1976

⁸⁸ Alex Dias Ribeiro *Who Won the World Cup?—The Answer May Surprise You*, (Braunton, Riverside International), 1995

⁸⁹ *Sport in Catholic Theology*, Page 61

⁹⁰ *Towards a theology of sport*

“evangelicals in this century...have virtually organized their faith around the issue of communicating the gospel...evangelicals characteristically subordinate the task of first-order thinking to tasks that seem to affect more tangibly the lives of people at large”.

Let me give the last word to Nick Watson, “Theology, as the founding discipline of the academy in the 13th century at the University of Paris, is a discipline that...has a place” in challenging prevailing worldviews in sport⁹².

Let us take up the challenge together and come back next year to present papers on Theology of Sport, present and future.

J S Weir
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⁹¹ Nathan Hatch, *Evangelicalism as a democratic movement*, in George Marsden, ed. *Evangelicalism and Modern America* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans), 1984, pp78-9

⁹² Theology, Ethics and Transcendence in Sports, Page 10