

Reaching for the Heavens

A (Very) Brief History of Religion and Sport

TO THOSE WHOSE ASSOCIATION with sport is mainly a matter of the grandstand or the TV, or indeed the sports center or swimming pool, it may come as a surprise to discover that the study of sport has become a major growth area in universities across the Western world. The sports pages of our newspapers give ample evidence of an interest in the physiological and even psychological aspects of sports performance, but in the academy scholars have been gainfully and increasingly employed on tracing the history of sports, in studying sport as a social phenomenon, and also considering sport's relation to religion—a relationship which properly and inevitably presents itself for scrutiny in any serious study of sport. Historically, taking a rather grand view and simplifying somewhat, we can say that the relationship between religion and sport (specifically, between Christianity and sport) has been characterized by three kinds of attitude. These attitudes have tended to predominate (or are very well illustrated) in particular historical phases and it permits the narrative which follows to be arranged into three distinct parts.

In ancient times sport appears to have been seen as a vehicle for communion with the divine and for regulating humanity's relationship with God or the gods. In such a world, sport was a sacred practice that enabled humans to reach for the heavens, so to speak, and many historians argue that the roots of modern sport are to be found in religious

rituals of one sort or another. While few would seriously speak of religion and sport as being coterminous today, there are some contemporary attitudes to sport that might be seen as similar to aspects of these ancient characteristics.

By contrast, another response typical of some early Christian and post-Reformation attitudes has been to see sport as a dangerous diversion, a frivolous exercise, a distraction from the serious business of living. If not sinful in itself, then it is quite likely to lead its performers and spectators towards sin and needs to be treated with caution or even hostility. This attitude has often been manifested in official pronouncements from church authorities, though various pieces of evidence suggest that the situation “on the ground” has often been more hospitable. Those who opposed games and sport did so because, far from believing that it allowed people to reach through sport for the heavens, they feared that it might lead them instead to hell.

A third response, again evident in antiquity but also in Christian responses within the last two hundred years, has seen sport as a means of character-building and moral improvement, and as such a highly appropriate activity for Christian participation. According to a typical instance of such an attitude, sport may not have any intrinsic religious substance but it may be an instrument in developing godly habits or states of mind. Alongside approval for sports generally we frequently see its instrumental usefulness—for spiritual growth, as an attention-grabbing tool in evangelism or a wholesome pastime for the disadvantaged, or indeed for more commercial purposes: sport has been useful to all kinds of people, some of them Christian ideologues and practitioners. Sport might be the ladder upon which its players might climb to godliness.

As we consider the history of sport we will see these three broad types of response manifested chronologically. To some extent all three are still characteristic of our contemporaries’ more ambivalent responses to sport, and all three will offer fruitful themes for our later theological reflections.

In chapter 4 we will define sport more carefully, but a word about what is meant by “sport” will be useful for us as we begin—if only to show that in this sphere, as in so many others, complex human activity defies neat definition. We need to distinguish “sport” from both “play” and “games,” though the three terms may be said to nest inside one another. This will be significant when we consider the theology of sport,

because we will also need to consider play and games in that context. “Play” is generally thought to be an unstructured activity, entire to itself and for its own sake. Some scholars thus speak of play as “autotelic”¹—it has no end or purpose beyond itself. Play is throwing a Frisbee to a friend on the beach or trying to hit a can with pebbles, or it may be a child’s make-believe game. In sporting terms though, a “game” may also involve playing Frisbee on the beach but now there are makeshift rules, changing and possibly unequal teams, common agreement on what might constitute a score. But this remains very local. There may or may not be an agreed finish time, though it is quite likely that it will be set by external requirements (dinner) or just fizzle out as people leave. Frisbee becomes “sport” when the rules that govern the game are universalized and bureaucratized. They are fixed away from the location of the game, and they remain the same on repeated playing of the game. Soccer on the beach will have many of the universalized rules (goals, equal teams, fouls, and free kicks) but probably not all: touch lines, off sides, referees, standardized measured goals with posts, and so on. These types of activity perhaps cannot be entirely and definitively separated from one another, there will be transitional instances such as that soccer game on the beach, which show how they bleed into one another. Generally, full rules (and, we might say, “true sport”) are found on the playing field and the court. And we should also note that *wherever* and *whenever* this sport has manifested itself, other things have tended to be found too: in particular, commercial interests have never been far away. Someone will sell the spectators a drink, and there is a good chance that someone else will open a book to take bets. Those who lament the lost innocent days of sport are lamenting an illusion. In fact, even when sport was primarily a religious ritual it is likely that commercial considerations intruded.

The term “sport,” then, refers precisely to a relatively modern phenomenon. What we now mean by “sport” in our everyday conversation,

1. Johan Huizinga speaks of play as “pointless” and suggests that in its purest sense play serves no other purpose beyond itself. It shares this characteristic with religious ritual. See his *Homo Ludens*, 2, 19. Allen Guttman wants to argue that the suggestion that all ancient play is essentially cultic is a *denial* of its autotelic nature. See *From Ritual*, 19. We will consider in chapter 6 whether play, and indeed sport, should be considered necessarily autotelic. Guttman, incidentally, also helpfully proposes that sport needs to be distinguished from contests as well as play and games—thus helping us distinguish rugby from scrabble, for instance (*From Ritual*, 5–7). We return to this at the beginning of chapter 4 where I will propose that contest needs to be part of the definition of sport.

“modern sport” in its universalized and bureaucratized forms, may generally be said to be less than two hundred years old—though a case could be made in a few instances to go back further. However, as we shall see, the sport of the ancient Greeks has many features in common with “modern sports,” while many of the major public spectacles of the Romans perhaps had rather fewer such common features. By the Middle Ages, most of the activities that we might consider in a history of sport are not really sports at all in the sense in which I have defined them. I use the term “sport,”² then, with some elasticity in my historical narrative. The ancient proto-sports have some connection with our modern activities, but were also technically different in important ways. It would be tiresome to note this at each and every juncture but the reader ought to bear the differences in mind.

Sacred Sport?

Sport appears to have its ancient origins in religion and ritual. Nowhere is this more graphically evident than in an ancient and deadly Meso-American ball game that was very important for three thousand years until the invasion of the Conquistadors and had a number of permutations. It was played on a court rather than a field, and more than fifteen hundred of these courts have been discovered. Mayan records suggest a mythology relating to the sun and the moon played out in the ball game: the game is variously described now according to the narrator as a cross between football, lacrosse, basketball, and volleyball. It appears that any part of the body except the hands could be used to hit the ball, and in some variations what we might call rackets and bats were used. In some early versions it is likely that the ball had to be played with the hip. The goal was a ring only slightly larger than a basketball hoop, placed high on a wall at right angles to the center of the court. A five-foot-high wall in front of the main wall and under the hoop meant that a direct angle of approach was not possible—the ball had to be bounced off the wall into the goal. Each team had seven players.

Sometimes the game appears to have been played for entertainment alone, often on more or less improvised courts, but the ceremonial

2. From hereon I will generally drop the use of quotation marks when referring elastically to ancient practices which we may consider do not meet our modern definitions.

version of the game was a much more serious affair. It seems that the ball may have been a symbol for the sun and the court for the galaxy; or the game may have played out a grisly mythological tale relating to the founding of the world, and the transition from death to life. In any case, the game would end when the first goal was scored in the hoop twenty feet off the ground—though it was so difficult to score a goal that the game could last for days.³ There is some debate about what happened next. In one location on the smaller wall under the hoop are carvings of the “award ceremony.” Seven players of one team face seven players of the other team. In the center, underneath each goal, are the captains. One is holding the other’s severed head.⁴ It has usually been thought that the winning captain executed his losing counterpart at the end of the game, but more recently it has been suggested that the winner may have been given the special prize of an immediate trip to paradise. It was the former Liverpool Football Club manager, Bill Shankly, who said, “Some people believe football is a matter of life and death. I’m very disappointed with that attitude. I can assure you it is much, much more important than that.”⁵

In this Central-American ritual, sport had cosmic significance, and was used to reflect and perhaps regulate the relationship of humanity with the cosmos in the broadest sense, or its gods more particularly. Something similar can be seen much more recently in the aboriginal ball games of Native Americans. The Cherokee people engaged in a game that is often seen as the precursor to modern lacrosse, on a huge pitch with a goal at either end. When we read the accounts of these games now what strikes us are not only the similarities with modern sports (they are often more like modern rationalized sports than many traditional Western games, for instance) but the way in which the game is surrounded by religious ritual and preparation.⁶ The medicine men are present throughout the build-up and playing of the game, which could be extremely violent. The game is understood to be played in the presence of, and addressed

3. For a detailed description of the game and its variants see Schele and Miller, *Blood of Kings*, chapter VI.

4. For a description of this mural see Foster, *Ancient Maya*, 197.

5. See the beginning of chapter 5 for more on the context of this remark. It can be found online in *Mirror Football*, “Wit and Wisdom.”

6. “. . . the most obvious difference between ‘our’ sports and ‘theirs’ is the constant presence of medicine men and their performance of elaborate ritual acts which are, from our perspective, extraneous to the game.” Guttmann, *Whole New Ball Game*, 19.

to, the Great Spirit, and players undergo ascetic preparation and engage in ritual chants and dances. The ball seems to have been thought of as sacred—perhaps representing the sun or the moon—and so cannot be touched by hand. When the men play the women dance and sing while watching. It appears that, as in Central America,⁷ women had their own versions of the game but that the ceremonial version was male only. The gender divide has a long sporting history. The Cherokee game was understood to be a means of assuring fertility for the tribe, its livestock, and land, as well as manipulating the weather. This sport is the vehicle by which humankind relates to greater powers. It is not so much true to say that this sport is *related to* religion as that it *is* religion.

The same might be said of other Native American games, such as the Apache relay races in which one team represented the sun and the animals, the other the moon and the plant world, and that was run across a track called the Milky Way—the course upon which the sun and moon “raced” each day. Similarly elaborate ritual preparations accompany the race, and once more the Great Spirit is invoked.⁸ Such sporting ritual may seem a very long way from contemporary sporting endeavor—though, as we shall see, there are also good reasons to compare them carefully and reflect upon that comparison. Modern sport has become, for participants and spectators, highly ritualized, and some athletes speak about their own competing in religious terms.

More familiar to most readers will be the ancient Olympic Games, often ascribed a special place in the history of Western thought and certainly narrated in the ideology of amateurism from the nineteenth century onwards. Homer tells us that the Olympic Games had been played for some centuries earlier, but they are traditionally dated to 776 BCE.⁹ This coincided with a population expansion and the founding of new city states, and some uniform organization was needed in order to allow competition that was not merely based on local conventions. Similar universalizing needs drive the development of modern sport in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As athletes from all over gathered in one place to compete, each bringing their own local version of the race, or the bout, some standardization was necessary. Again and again this is the reason for the codification of rules: to allow people from different

7. See Miller and Taube, *Ancient Mexico*, 43–44.

8. Guttman, *Whole New Ball Game*, 19–21.

9. Harris, *Sport*, 15.

localities to compete with one another. It was necessary to set the parameters of a contest (most basically, what counted as a legitimate win) when prize money and betting were involved. In disconcerting ways, given the generally idyllic view of historic sport, money raises its head even on Mount Olympus, and later more modern sports such as cricket also saw the codification of rules for such motives.

The ancient Greeks staged several cycles of games, each with a similar but distinct pattern. There were games at Delphi, Corinth, and Nemea as well as Olympus, and even then the games at Olympus were held every fourth year. The origin of the Olympus cycle of games is ultimately mysterious, though the subject of many a mythological explanation. Initially the games site was undeveloped with minimal spectator facilities and largely improvised competition space. But a stadium of some sort seems eventually to have been built here and in every Greek city of significance. Typically, they were rectangular, two hundred yards by forty yards with a starting line at each end and a divider up the middle with a turning post at each end of track. In mountainous countryside they usually had to be artificially created. But commodious conditions for athletes and spectators took a long time to develop.

Olympus had become a shrine to Zeus in about 1000 BCE and the games that developed there were probably held in his honor.¹⁰ Religious ceremonies were interwoven with the games in a pattern that became fixed around 450 BCE and that continued for many hundreds of years until their eventual demise in the disintegrating Roman Empire. The first day was one of religious ceremonies, with athletes and patrons making offerings and taking oaths. On the second day chariot-racing was followed by horse-racing in the morning, and the pentathlon was held in the afternoon. Day three had massive religious ceremonies in the morning and foot-racing events in the afternoon. On day four the combat events took place—boxing, wrestling, and the particularly violent *pankration*—a kind of no-holds-barred fighting. Then on the fifth and final day prizes were awarded, thanks offered to Zeus, and a huge celebratory banquet brought the games to a close.¹¹

The crowds who watched the games brought money to spend, and the glory of winning proved transferable—from competitors to sponsors

10. For an outline of the complex religio-sporting etiology of the games at Olympus see Drees, *Olympia*, 21–32. Harris, *Sport*, 16–17, plays down the religious importance of these games.

11. Baker, *Sports*, 16–21.

and supporters. Athletes would often be seen to represent wealthy patrons (who in earliest times received the prize rather than the athlete, as modern-day racehorse owners do) or even their city states. As winning brought glory and customers, participants began to be paid for their endeavors and a class of professional sportsman emerged. According to a nostalgic view, Greek sport *decays* into professionalism, and the standards of skill and fitness drove the amateurs out of competition (exactly the reason why some rugby union officials opposed professionalism, believing, rightly, that it would take the game at the highest level away from the ordinary players who would not be able to compete with those who had leisure and resources to train). But another theory suggests that such a view merely perpetuates the amateur ideology of nineteenth- and twentieth-century ruling bodies, and that “an ancient amateur is an anachronism.”¹² Indeed, the ancient prizes were already very valuable: the winner of the boys’ race in Athens received a prize one scholar estimates as the equivalent of \$45,000.¹³ With prize money, inevitably, came corruption. Races were fixed with bribes; collusion provided draws and shared prize money. Yet spectators remained passionate.

Scholars disagree on exactly what part religion played in the classical games. Certainly Greek sport thrived at religious festivals where large numbers assembled. But was it just a matter of the games coinciding with religious festivals, or was it—as was generally believed until more recently—that the games themselves had some continuing religious purpose, were a kind of offering or expiation, something given to please the gods? It is difficult to be definitive on the question of whether the games or the religious ceremony had initial and continuing priority, and whether or when there was a change in their symbiotic relationship. Religion was so enmeshed in ancient life, in social, political, and other practices, that it may be misleading even to pose the question in this way.

There appears to be a temptation for some contemporary scholars to downplay the religious element, perhaps reflecting the lesser social significance of contemporary religion in our society. The modern Olympic movement established by Pierre de Coubertin tries to distance itself from the more overtly religious interpretations,¹⁴ and talks instead of its *moral* vision, of helping to build “a peaceful and better world by educating

12. Golden, *Ancient Greece*, 142.

13. Golden, *Ancient Greece*, 142.

14. See IOC, “Ancient Olympic Games.”

youth through sport practiced without discrimination of any kind and in the Olympic spirit, which requires mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play.”¹⁵ It omits to tell us that de Coubertin had strong views on the role of women in sport (that they should be present only to applaud the men)—such information would be as unhelpful today as would favoring any religion. The Olympic Charter states that “Olympism is a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind. Blending sport with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy found in effort, the educational value of good example and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles.”¹⁶

It has to be said that “promoting ethics” sounds rather vague: *whose* ethics? De Coubertin actually spoke of a “religion of sport,”¹⁷ but it is clear also that he understood the religious element to be principally found in the taking of an oath to the spirit of fair play and amateurism.¹⁸ Sport has a history, and it is a history constantly written and rewritten from the perspectives of those with an interest of one sort or another.

Whatever has become of the ancient Olympics in their more modern iterations, in the ancient examples of sport that we have scanned we have seen sport fulfilling some sort of religious function. Sport and religion are congruent. It would be foolish to object to sport in such religious practice—they belong naturally together. This sport is a vehicle for, or manipulator of, divine energy, activity or communication. We have nothing quite like this in our contemporary sporting landscape. Perhaps the discourse of American evangelical sport comes closest. An American speed skater in the 2010 Vancouver Winter Games spoke of how he was “competing for God.”¹⁹ Milan footballer Kaka has “God is faithful” stitched into the tongues of his boots, and celebrates goals by raising a pointed figure to the sky as an act of praise. Countless footballers cross themselves when entering the field of play. Such rituals might seem mere superstition to the skeptic, but it would be wrong to dismiss all such practice out of hand in this way. Can sport be an expression of faith, an

15. IOC, “Commission for Culture.”

16. IOC, “Charter,” 12.

17. See his 1935 essay “Philosophic Foundations,” 131, in Carl-Diem-Institut, *Olympic Idea*, and quoted by Parry in “Olympism and Peace,” 208.

18. De Coubertin, “Opening Address,” 17, and quoted by Parry in “Olympism and Peace,” 207.

19. Fairchild, “Trevor Marsicano’s Faith.”

offering to the gods/God? Can sport be a means by which its participants, and perhaps even its spectators, reach for the heavens? Is it right to think of sports in these ways? And if it might be, what could we understand spectators to be doing as they sit in their thousands around the great shrines of contemporary sport—is there some vicarious, transferrable process taking place that allows them too to offer something to, or receive something from, a higher force? To these and other questions we will return.

“Keeping Company with the Devil”?

As we move away from the classical period and into the Middle Ages in the West we see a change in the relation of organized sports to religion. We can probably begin to trace this change to a more ambivalent and at times much more negative attitude in the Roman Empire with its “bread and circuses.” This famous phrase was penned by Juvenal in his tenth *Satire* to suggest that the mass of the Roman population had abnegated its political influence and activity and cared now only for food and entertainment. Entertainment, at least by their own standard, was what they got. Roman politicians competed with one another to outdo their rivals in games of increasing ostentation and cost for the first four hundred years of the Christian era. The stadia in which sporting events were staged in the later years of the empire were of staggering size, dwarfing Greek venues. Rome’s Circus Maximus, for instance, is thought to have held between 150,000 and 250,000 people. Like the Grecian games, Roman sport appears to have originated at religious festivals.²⁰ But they became a means of amusing a proletariat in danger of being bored or otherwise stirred to dissatisfaction with the regime. The games were used as a safety valve and a distraction. While Greek games clearly had some kind of military flavor, the Roman games valorized full-blooded warrior combat. Life was cheap in Roman sport. Centuries later Marxist critics would suggest that sport was a tool of capitalism in suppressing the masses; others would suggest, more neutrally, that sport served the vital function of social safety valve.²¹ Both of these interpretations of sport find some *prima facie* support in the Colosseum and Circus Maximus.

20. Köhne, “Bread and Circuses,” 9.

21. Guttmann, *Spectators*, 147–48.

The chariot races divided supporters into partisan tribes of followers, and inscriptions have been found that show a dedication to one of the four (later two) main teams that appears to go beyond rational explanation and approximate rather eerily to modern football fanaticism.²² Charioteers were injured and even killed in their hectic races—but it was the gladiators who epitomized Roman attitudes to sport. Gladiatorial combat originated at funeral ceremonies as a way of celebrating the noble life of the departed, and proved such a compelling spectacle that it grew into a major sporting event attended by tens of thousands, with heroes and villains, and copious amounts of blood. Unlike most sporting competitors, these men (and sometimes women) were quite literally fighting for their lives in the arena. The combats proved useful not only as a means of controlling a restive population, but also as a way of disposing of certain undesirables. Because nearly all gladiators died eventually (they had to survive three years to have a chance of being allowed to leave the arena), criminals and prisoners of war could be sentenced to the gladiators' schools in what the authorities regarded as a win/win—it was the equivalent of the death sentence in reality, but gave the illusion of hope: the combatants received training and were given weapons, thereby getting more of a chance than those who were condemned to unarmed combat against some starved wild animals kept specifically for the purpose.

As well as criminals and prisoners of war, slaves were sometimes used in these games—especially if large numbers were required, as for Claudius' mock-up sea battle (though the deaths were real enough).²³ Some of the crimes punishable by the arena seem trivial to us, but others will sound more serious. High treason, for instance, could land a defendant in a gladiatorial school, and Christians were among those who were charged with high treason when they failed to comply with the requirements of the imperial religion. It is not surprising then that Christians were in the forefront of opposition to Roman games. They were not quite alone, and some Roman intellectuals carped that the games were barbaric and inhuman. But Christians, who might be said to have had a vested interest in opposing the Roman games, were consistently vehement. Around the turn of the second century CE, Ignatius wrote of them to

22. Guttman, *Spectators*, 28–30.

23. Nineteen thousand combatants participated in this typically extravagant Claudian event: *Guttman*, *Spectators*, 20.

the church in Rome as the “cruel tortures of the devil”²⁴ and Clement probably has martyrdom in the arena in mind when speaking of “many indignities and tortures.”²⁵ The most sustained attack came from Tertullian in his *On Spectacles*, written about a hundred years later around 200 CE. He has little respect for the spectators: “See the people coming to [the circus] already under strong emotion, already tumultuous, already passion-blind, already agitated about their bets. The praetor is too slow for them: their eyes are ever rolling as though along with the lots in his urn; then they hang all eager on the signal; there is the united shout of a common madness. Observe how ‘out of themselves’ they are by their foolish speeches.”²⁶

Tertullian’s concerns about a crowd taking on the character of a mob, blinded to rationality, driven by gambling, echo through the centuries of Christian commentary on sport. What happens to people when they gather in large numbers to watch sport? Are they somehow enlivened and exalted by this common experience, or are they diminished and degraded by it? Tertullian saw the choice as stark—Christians should avoid the games: “How many other undoubted proofs we have had in the case of persons who, by keeping company with the devil in the shows, have fallen from the Lord! For no one can serve two masters. What fellowship has light with darkness, life with death?”²⁷ Far from a means of reaching for the heavens, Tertullian and others saw these games as a descent into hades.

Tertullian also judges the contestants harshly. “I suppose [the boxer] received these caestus-scars, and the thick skin of his fists, and these growths upon his ears, at his creation! God, too, gave him eyes for no other end than that they might be knocked out in fighting! I say nothing of him who, to save himself, thrusts another in the lion’s way, that he may not be too little of a murderer when he puts to death that very same man on the arena.”²⁸

24. Ignatius, *Romans*, 5:3.

25. Clement, *First Epistle*, 6:1.

26. Tertullian, *On Spectacles*, XVI.

27. Tertullian, *On Spectacles*, XXVI.

28. Tertullian, *On Spectacles*, XXIII. A *caestus* was a glove worn in hand combat competitions such as boxing or pankration. Made from strips of leather, it often also contained metal plates or spikes giving it a rather more aggressive purpose than a modern boxing glove.

The games' origin in, and continued connection with, pagan religious rites were damning, and Tertullian saw them as an indication of the abuse of God's creation by God's creatures.²⁹ All in all, and not least because of the bloodshed, "these [games] are not consistent with true religion and true obedience to the true God."³⁰

It must be said that, Tertullian's objections notwithstanding, Christians did not always avoid the games. In fact, away from Rome where instances of Christians being martyred in the arena were less conspicuous, they often made their compromise with them. Even after Christianity became the religion of the empire in the fourth century the games were not banned but at first only prohibited on Sundays. It is often suggested that the games at Olympus were condemned by Theodosius (emperor from 379 to 395) because of their associations with pagan cults, but there is no official record of this. They did cease after the 392 games and it is possible that he had brought them to an end.³¹ However, when games did stop altogether through the empire, it is likely that the causes are to be found as much in the changing economic circumstances and general disintegration of the empire as in any genuine religious objections.

It would be wrong, however, to suggest that all the evidence of early Christian attitudes to sport is negative. There are the well-known allusions of the apostle Paul to sport in his letters. While it is true that Paul does not explicitly support sports in using the imagery of running the race, or wrestling with evil, winning the prize, and so on, there does seem to be an implicit approval in his references.³² It is almost certain that he has in mind the "purer" Greek forms of the games rather than the Roman crowd-pleasers. Clement of Rome, while referring negatively to the games as we have seen, is also among those borrowing its language to celebrate Christian martyrs whom he refers to as "those champions who lived nearest to our time."³³ Here there can be no doubt that the more barbaric Roman games shape the imagery in question.

It will seem obvious to us that Christians should oppose a sport that involved state-sanctioned killing, and opposition to gladiatorial combat in particular seems unexceptional. But we should also note the attacks on

29. Tertullian, *On Spectacles*, III.

30. Tertullian, *On Spectacles*, I.

31. Some connect his opposition to the Olympics with his concern about the role of women in pagan cultic practice. See Gill, "Chapters."

32. See the discussion of Paul's athletic imagery in chapter 4.

33. Clement, *First Epistle*, 5:1.

the games more generally. They often focus on what is seen as an abuse of God's creation by those made in God's image,³⁴ and upon the dangers inherent in spectating—mob mentality, gambling, drunkenness and other vices (brothels were usually sited close to the arenas). Both of these lines of attack will resurface after the Reformation but in the meantime, as in the Roman Empire, Christians often made their peace with popular entertainment, and even (as with Paul) appear to have nodded approvingly in its direction or given mixed messages on the subject (Clement).

As the religious festivals of Greece and Rome had been hosts of sport, this was to be the pattern in Christian Europe through the Middle Ages, though our knowledge of games and sports in the period is sketchy. There was something like bowling in Germany, something like shinty and hurling in Scotland and Ireland respectively, and judging from the comments of the Bishop of Clermont, something like football in France as early as the fifth century. As Christianity spread throughout Europe during this time its missionaries were by no means encouraged to stamp out local pastimes, even when linked with older pagan practices. According to Bede, writing in the eighth century,³⁵ Pope Gregory wrote in 601 to Abbot Mellitus, who was about to join the mission to England, that pagan temples should not be destroyed but only the idols in them—suggesting a policy of accommodation, of recycling pagan practice as Christian. The church in France, we know, adopted some ancient ball games into its Easter celebrations.³⁶ But more generally the church appears to have provided the framework for the playing of games through the sequence of holy days and Sundays.

The variety of games played in the Middle Ages is striking, though few of them could properly be called sports at this time, lacking the necessary bureaucracy and uniformity. Perhaps the tournament jousting of the aristocracy and gentry comes as close as anything, though following a number of fatalities which provoked ecclesiastical opposition the game of quintain began to take over in which knights jostled against a shield mounted on a rotating arm. The wealthy hunted, with the king often

34. Tertullian, *On Spectacles*, II.

35. “. . . the temples of the idols in that nation ought not to be destroyed; but let the idols that are in them be destroyed; let holy water be made and sprinkled in the said temples, let altars be erected, and relics placed. For if those temples are well built, it is requisite that they be converted from the worship of devils to the service of the true God.” Bede, *History*, Book I, chapter 30.

36. Baker, *Sports*, 45.

closely controlling the land on which hunting could take place. Games rather like hockey, football, and other ball games such as bowls; combat of various sorts (including archery); sports involving animals that could be extremely cruel to our modern eyes; and various racing games—all these and more were regular occurrences. They were also, however, very local affairs with no fixed rules, and without common patterns of play. Sport as a separate category of *thing* was unknown: contemporary accounts will, as late as the seventeenth century, speak of dancing and the theatre and games as if they are the same kinds of activities.

But games, alongside other forms of leisure, thrived on church occasions and often on church property with the church yard or cloisters often used for this purpose especially if there was no suitable common land. It is true that there seems to have been an ambivalence about the church's attitude here, though it may be going too far to say that it was merely tolerated and that the church in general had little time for it.³⁷ There were sporadic attempts to discourage clergy from playing dice, and wrestling, as well as hunting and hawking, but these attempts were rarely successful.

Gloucester Cathedral has a medieval carving of what appears to be football, and its fourteenth-century great east window has a depiction of an early form of golf—or is it hockey? Their inclusion in this sacred space does not suggest hostility to games, and might even be taken to suggest the blessing of some of them at least.³⁸ Churchyard gates served for the locals as football goals, church walls were used for ball games, and churchyard yews were plundered by archers in need of a bow. In the middle of the fourteenth century the Archbishop of York banned “wrestlings, shootings or plays,” and a hundred years later a far broader list was issued, including bowling, tennis, handball, football, stoolball, and “all manner of other games.”³⁹ Perhaps the church authorities were less enamored than the ordinary clergy on the ground, but none of the interdictions seemed really to stick, and their protestations will have a familiar ring to contemporary church councils who have tried to prevent damage to the parish hall by the youth club. The authorities in general favored archery, and anything else that might help ready a man for military service. But the ordinary people just liked to have a good time on their day off.

37. As Brailsford suggests: *British Sport*, 12, passim.

38. See Gloucester Cathedral, “The Gloucester Golfer.”

39. Brailsford, *British Sport*, 14.

Early forms of football are particularly colorful, and, it must be said, violent. Often played over vast areas, with “goals” miles apart, they were mass participation events. One of these games, the Haxey Hood, was played in Lincolnshire since at least the fourteenth century, and has recently been annually reenacted.⁴⁰ A quaint story was probably superimposed upon an ancient fertility game, and historians now generally consider that its origin lies not in the chivalrous recovery of m’lady’s garments, but in “the conflict over an animal or even human head, whose blood would be held to make fruitful the fields of the victors . . . or to prosper their fishing.”⁴¹ Played over a dozen acres of land, with thirteen named characters and a boozy cast of hundreds, the winning team has to get the “hood” to their pub while three other teams have similar ideas. There were few rules beyond that, and the result appears to have been pretty chaotic. Football, like all these games, was always a local phenomenon, sometimes more orderly but usually sprawling and tending towards the rough. We find some stories of how such games could be used to settle local scores, and hide nefarious intent. The record of a game at North Moreton in Oxfordshire in May 1598, for instance, describes the sort of primitive football game that would have been common all over the country during the preceding centuries. But at this game two players were killed by an opponent, and there was cause to suspect that it may not have been entirely accidental.⁴²

Where the church did have clear misgivings was not so much with the games themselves as with what often came with them. Football games were inevitably rough but sometimes, as at North Moreton, worse. Sometimes the game was not so rough, but an admixture of alcohol could quickly change that. Some games could damage property, including church property. Attracting large numbers of people, crowd problems could easily follow. The notion of “spectator” is often inappropriate here—the traditional football matches, for instance, did not really have spectators, everyone played in one way or another. But the crowds who gathered tended to drink, gamble, and otherwise cavort. When women

40. Peacock, *Hood-Game*, 331–32, suggests that at the end of the nineteenth century there were concerns that the traditional game might be fading. The game, which set neighbor against neighbor with its slogan “Hoose agin hoose, toon agin toon, and if you meet a man knock him doon” (341) appears to have revived, even if in a tongue-in-cheek, and more civilized form. See YouTube video: “Haxey Hood 2012.”

41. Brailsford, *British Sport*, 2.

42. See Sharp, *Bewitching*, 14–19.

took part in racing they often slit their dresses at the side so that they could run more easily, or made other brazen adjustments to their clothing. Some worried that it was not just running that was made easier by such adjustments. Games on a saint's day could become raucous and get out of hand. But it is a mixed picture, and the church liked to have it both ways, often sponsoring these events as "Church Ales" that would raise money for the parish.

While Gloucester Cathedral's artwork might suggest an acceptance of games, even a blessing of them in some quarters, it is difficult to suggest that they had any recognized or valued sacred element to them. Medieval game players were not engaged in the same sort of activity as the Mayan ball players, the athletes at Olympus, or even the Cherokee and Apache "lacrosse" players and runners. They did not appear to be reaching for the heavens in their games so much as enjoying a break from the more grinding routines of their lives. But the authorities saw that, while games were usually as socially stratified as the societies in which we find them, they could also seem somewhat anarchic—dangerous to persons, property, morality, and good order. It is with this in mind that we see some interesting and opposite developments in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

The rediscovery of classical culture in the Renaissance brought a new appreciation of the aesthetics of the human body, including a positive evaluation of athletic exercise. It may be helpful to speak of a north/south divide here, with Southern Europe having a more inclusively aesthetic and Northern Europe a more strictly intellectual perspective.⁴³ Certainly this seems to reflect the contours of the Reformation, and others can decide on cause and effect here. In Italy in 1528 Castiglione published *The Book of the Courtier*, in which he recognized that life at court required an easy facility with both recreations and manners, as well as a certain military preparedness. In England Sir Thomas Elyot had probably read Castiglione and warmed to his theme in *The Boke Named the Governour*, first published in 1531. He was particularly interested in the education of gentlemen, and suggested that all study and no exercise would exhaust "the spirites vitall," affect digestion, and increase vulnerability to sickness.⁴⁴ There seems to be a basic, intuitive physiology in Elyot's advocacy of wrestling, swimming, fencing, riding, hunting, archery—and dancing.

43. See Baker, *Sports*, 72–74.

44. Elyot, *Governour*, 74.

He quotes Augustine in his defense of dancing, who, he argues, was not against dancing as such but only its pagan forms that could lead to fornication. Elyot thought that cards and backgammon could quicken a man's wit, whereas dicing was likely to lead to vice.

Richard Mulcaster, in a treatise on education in 1581, appears to go further than Elyot or Castiglione, and seems to have read and digested a good deal of the argument of another Italian, Girolamo Mercuriale, who had published on the subject a dozen years earlier. Mulcaster was interested in the education of all social groups, and spent quite a considerable time on games. He describes the soul and body as “co-partners in good and ill, sweete and sowre, in mirth and mourning”⁴⁵ and as such should be trained together. Mulcaster tries to define the nature of health and sickness with a primitive biology based on the four elements, and argues that exercise has a role in maintaining equilibrium. Different kinds of exercise can achieve different results. He includes wrestling, walking, fencing, running, leaping, swimming, riding, hunting, shooting, and ball games in his exercise curriculum before going on to argue that football too had considerable potential. He suggests that tutors should act as referees to curb the violent tendencies often associated with the game. Perhaps through Mercuriale, he seems aware of the Italian game *calcio* (still the Italian word for soccer) that was played each year in Florence and was more closely regulated than traditional football in England—with equal teams and a clearly marked pitch.⁴⁶ Mulcaster appears unique as an Elizabethan advocate of football in England.

But among these various attempts to suggest a usefulness in games we do not find much attempt at a theological vindication of them. Strangely, perhaps, the nearest we come to this is in the infamous *Book of Sports* published by James I in 1618.⁴⁷ Puritans in Lancashire had been making life difficult for their fellows who enjoyed traditional pastimes after church on Sundays and on other feast days. To the Puritans all this seemed blatant Sabbath-breaking. James' response may not be profound theology, but it claims a missiological motive. Catholics of the county will think Protestantism entirely without enjoyment if they may not even play their games on Sunday afternoons and saints' days, he argues, and so

45. Mulcaster, *Training Up of Children*, 51.

46. To watch a reenactment of *calcio* see YouTube videos, “Calcio Storico Fiorentino.”

47. James I, *The Kings Majesties Declaration to His Subjects Concerning Lawfull Sports to be Used* is colloquially referred to as *The Book of Sports*.

will be less likely to convert. But a second reason sounds more sinister: ordinary people will be prevented from the exercise that they need to be ready for military service. He is also afraid that, if prevented from play, the poor especially will simply be idle and drunk—an interesting objection given Puritan concerns. After all, if they cannot play on these occasions, when can they, being otherwise always at work? The existing Sunday laws should be enforced, James insisted, and if Puritans did not like the laws of the land they could find another land. Violent recreations were still banned, as was—curiously—bowling for “the meaner sort of People.”⁴⁸ But church remained the first Sunday duty, and those who did not attend were also to be denied lawful recreations. James ruled that his book was to be read from pulpits across the land, causing uproar with many clergy refusing to comply. His book became a continued source of resentment among Puritans.

The opposite movement to that in Renaissance humanistic education did, however, come from a decidedly theological source. The Puritans have become known for a sour objection to any form of pleasure, including games and sport. The reality is, as might be expected, more nuanced.

While the continental Reformers stood on the northern side of the Renaissance divide mentioned above, their attitude to games was by no means wholly negative. Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli both valued physical fitness: Luther commended gymnastics and wrestling among other pursuits, and Zwingli saw the military value of exercise. Calvin was more cautious: he played quoits and bowls, but took a hard line on cards, dice, and gambling generally.⁴⁹ But while Calvin inherited a seedy Geneva waiting to be cleaned up, all three operated in their pomp in contexts where they could set the tone. The English Puritans, by contrast, found themselves in a more contested situation. As early as the sixteenth century, with the English Reformation not going far or deep enough for their convictions, Puritans were beginning to have an influence on lifestyle matters that was disproportionate to their numbers.

There were two principal types of objection to games articulated by the Puritans, and we see them clearly in Phillip Stubbes’ *The Anatomie of Abuses*, published in 1583. The first relates to the breaking of the Sabbath in particular, but also relates to more general calendar issues. For

48. James I, *Declaration*, 8.

49. Brailsford, *Sport and Society*, 38; Hill, *Society and Puritanism*, 170.

Stubbes and his fellows the Sabbath was a day for listening to God's Word in sermons, marveling at the Creator and his creation, and for resting. It was not a day, therefore, for feasts (including the Church Ales organized by the church itself), or playing any kind of game—or indeed for “reading of lascivious and wanton books, and an infinit number of such like practices and prophane exercises used upon that Day, whereby the Lord God is dishonoured, his Sabaoth violated, his word neglected, his Sacraments contemned and his People mervelously corrupted, and caryed away from true virtue and godlynes.”⁵⁰ Some recreations showed pagan or popish aspects, and the Puritan opposition to games on the Sabbath also included all the saints' days when ordinary people refrained from work, and played. There were a considerable number of these in the year, and there may be an interesting socioeconomic aspect to Puritan opposition: Puritans tended to be urban and were more likely to be in business or commerce.⁵¹ They defended their right (and that of their employees!) to work six days each week without interruption from saints' days—and after six days' hard work, rest was an appropriate way to spend the Sabbath. Sabbath observance was already on the statute book, Puritans wanted existing laws enforced, and as their influence grew court records show that they managed to ensure this in a patchy way across the country.

The other main objection to recreations was, again, less to the recreations themselves but more to do with the type of behavior that often accompanied them. For Christians to play cards or bowls together, without gambling, was acceptable to Stubbes—but those who won money were no better than robbers in taking money that they had not earned.⁵² But despite this concession Stubbes called bowls “brothel bowls” and complained that it leads to swearing, blaspheming, and “Whordome, Thefte, Robberie, Deceipt, Fraude, Cosenage, fighting Quareling, and Sometymes Murder . . . drinking, beggerye.”⁵³ Football attracted particular censure as one of those practices that lured men into sin. It is better described as “a freendly kinde of fight, then a play or recreation. A bloody and murthering practice, then a felowly sporte or pastime. For doth not everyone lye

50. Stubbes, “The Manner of Sanctifying The Sabaoth in Aligna,” in *Anatomie of Abuses*.

51. See Hill, *Society and Puritanism*, 153–59, 191.

52. Stubbes, “Cards, Dice, Tables, Tennis, Bowles, and other exercises, vsed unlawfully in Aligna,” *Anatomie of Abuses*.

53. Stubbes, “Cards, Dice, Tables, Tennis, Bowles, and other exercises, vsed unlawfully in Aligna,” *Anatomie of Abuses*.

in waight for his Aadversarie, seeking to overthrowe him and picke him on his nose, though it be upon hard stones, in ditch or dale, in valley or hill, or what place soever it be, hee careth not so he haue him down.”⁵⁴

The inherent violence of football creates particular problems, and is not unconnected from the energetic opposition to sports such as cock-fighting and bear-baiting, though the Puritans seem to have been more concerned with public than with private recreation, and more with the recreation of ordinary working people than with those of the gentry: hunting, for instance, escaped lightly. One kind of behavior to which any of these recreations might lead was idleness. Time was a precious gift from God for the Puritans, and had to be invested carefully and with an eye to its productive outcome—whether for the soul or the pocket.⁵⁵

Stubbes’ polemic has one other feature worth noting. He records a number of disasters interpreted as divine judgment for Sabbath-breaking in particular. There was a considerable popular appetite for such stories, and while there may be some exaggeration in Stubbes’ accounts they seem generally accurate. One such instance is the collapse of the spectator gallery at the Paris Gardens Bear Pit in London on a Sunday in January 1583. Other contemporary accounts suggest that the wooden supports were rotten, but Stubbes sees the cause of this disaster in divine vengeance.⁵⁶

There are more moderate voices than Stubbes’⁵⁷ but the general drift is similar, and retains the ambivalence we see in Stubbes on bowls, for instance: acceptable sometimes, “brothel bowls” another time. In fact, we might make sense of much of this ambivalence by understanding the Puritans as favoring moderation in recreations, and noting that they are less intrinsically opposed to many pastimes than they are either to their occasion (Sundays, saints’ days), their accompaniment (drunkenness, gambling, general moral laxity), or their consequences (vice, idleness).

54. Stubbes, “A fearful Iudgement of God shewed at the Theaters,” *Anatomic of Abuses*.

55. George Herbert reflects this fear of idleness among the wealthier in his *The Country Parson*, the earliest pastoral theology written in English, published posthumously in 1652.

56. Stubbes, “A fearful Iudgement of God shewed at the Theaters,” *Anatomic of Abuses*; see also Pearson, “Composition,” 323–24.

57. For instance, Lawrence Humphrey, whose *The Nobles* cautiously advocated moderate exercise.

This note of moderation is also clear in the new American colonies. Benjamin Colman could sound balanced in speaking of “sober mirth,” but his long list of unacceptable behaviors was set against a shorter one of the mirths that were acceptable; John Winthrop’s journal, like Stubbes’ *Anatomie* in England, interpreted disasters as judgments on the ungodly.⁵⁸ Many of the traditional pastimes of England were brought to New England but ball games at first did not prosper. There was some horse-racing, and also hunting and fishing—partly, no doubt, due to their utility value, but perhaps also because they were not sports that encouraged spectating. But even hunting on the Sabbath could lead to a whipping in 1630 Massachusetts, and the colony outlawed shuffleboard in 1647 and bowling in 1650.⁵⁹ The harsh conditions provided another reason to frown on idleness, and the Massachusetts court explicitly forbade it. It is something of a caricature, but one that seems well-founded, that by comparison with New Englanders the typical Southern colonist was more likely to engage wholeheartedly in outdoor sports. In the South a much more positive attitude developed to recreation, perhaps more akin to Restoration England, but imbued with a distinctive code of honor and masculinity.⁶⁰

In England when the Puritan party was in the ascendancy after the Civil War, many popular recreations were effectively outlawed—though once again, the geographical effectiveness of this varied quite considerably. Robert Dover’s “Olimpicks” perished, as did maypoles and other popular pastimes. Parliament passed new Acts against recreations on Sundays in 1655 and 1657, and divided England and Wales into eleven regions under army supervision to enforce the legislation. But still success was not universal, and after the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 the pendulum swung back with the authorities then promoting traditional pastimes vigorously.

At the end of the century John Locke published *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*. He began by quoting the pre-Socratic wisdom of

58. Daniels, *Puritans at Play*, 18–19.

59. See Guttman, *Whole New Ball Game*, 27–28. Guttman suggests that, in general, New England leaders took a lead from the old world’s divines: and while Edward Elton wrote in 1625 of the value of exercise for refreshing the body and mind, and John Downname wrote that “honest recreation is a thing not oenly lawfull, but also profitable and necessary,” his list of appropriate recreations included hunting, hawking, fishing, archery, running, wrestling, and fencing. Richard Baxter later wrote along similar lines in his *Directory*.

60. See Gorn and Goldstein, *Brief History*, 27–30.

Thales that advocated a healthy mind in a healthy body. It would be a while before *mens sana in corpore sano* would become a sports apologist's battle cry, but the world was changing. In 1660 the Royal Society was founded, and while science was in its infancy we can trace a trajectory towards technology and industrialization that gathers pace. With these innovations come dramatic changes in employment and communities, and all of these had an effect on traditional games. While the Puritan influence waned, it did not die, and we see some of their concerns surface again in widely different locations.

Puritan influence on British national policy never again reached the heights of the Cromwellian period, but it did remain a conditioning factor on attitudes to games and leisure in general on both sides of the Atlantic. In Catholic Europe a much more relaxed posture can be seen regarding leisure on Sundays; the USA inherited both the British Protestant attitude to Sundays and the more accepting continental European one. The tension was visible in the differing regulations and practices relating to Sunday baseball in the diverse leagues—a tension only uneasily resolved in the 1930s.⁶¹ In Britain legislation caught up with actual practice more slowly. Lord Wyatt, speaking in a House of Lords debate as recently as 1987, drew attention to the way in which members of the Royal Family and government ministers had routinely broken the law by attending sporting fixtures at which the public were charged admission.⁶² References are made to Sunday legislation going as far back as 1625, but the 1987 attempt to reform the law failed because of particular concerns about horse-racing and betting on Sundays. The Puritans cast a long shadow.

Concerns about the accompanying behavior at sporting events and the possible consequences of exposure to sports also continued. The

61. Gorn and Goldstein, *Brief History*, 209–10. See also Kirsch, *American Team Sports*, 230–32.

62. In the House of Commons debate of the same bill, Andrew MacKay, MP, stated: “Even my most severe critics would concede that the current legislation is arcane and outdated. The Sunday Observance Act 1780 expressly forbids sporting events for which the public are charged admission to be organised on a Sunday. Those who organise the men's finals day at Wimbledon, the final rounds of most of our major professional and amateur golf championships, the British grand prix, athletic meetings, professional football matches and professional cricket matches on Sunday are breaching the law.” See Hansard, Sunday Sports Bill. House of Commons Debate. February 17, 1989. For Lord Wyatt's address see Hansard, Sunday Sports Bill. House of Lords Debate. November 5, 1987.

evangelical movement that breathed new life into an increasingly moribund and self-serving church both revived individual devotion and made new inroads into the everyday culture of ordinary people. But this movement also brought with it many of the Puritans' sensibilities. In particular, as Dominic Erdozain puts it, "seemingly hardwired into the evangelical psyche was the assumption that secular pleasure was the enemy of vital religion; that you could not have one and keep the other."⁶³ In reaction to forms of Christianity that seemed cerebral or formalized, Evangelicalism preached a gospel that laid claim on the whole person. This gospel provided all that was needed for personal fulfillment—it was its own enjoyment and no other sources were needed. In fact, other, competing claims on human affection were imposters to be driven out. Sport, like alcohol, and most other leisure pursuits, competed with Bible reading and prayer and these devotionals ought to have provided recreation enough. While Evangelicalism did introduce a new sense of pleasure into faith the source of that pleasure was always to be found inside the practices of the faith, not outside of them.

Conversion to Sport?

It might be said, therefore, that a Victorian morality was emerging before Victoria's reign had begun. Popular recreations were held in grave suspicion and, combined with a gradual urbanizing of the British population and the need to police an increasingly industrial workforce, some traditional pastimes were beginning to disappear. Before and apart from Evangelicalism, clergy were becoming more socially aloof from their people, less benign patrons of popular amusement and more distant gentlemen content to hunt and shoot. The ardent Methodists, however, went further—actively banning attendance at local feasts in the 1820s, and evangelical clergy were now campaigning against the old festivals, local race meets, and prize fights.⁶⁴ The social reformers, who felt that they knew what people needed—if not actually what they wanted—came up with various improving schemes, but none of them involved games: libraries and institutes, lectures and, in time, open space and public parks, but not games. Quite the contrary; a surgeon told a parliamentary committee in

63. Erdozain, *Problem of Pleasure*, 42.

64. See Brailsford, *British Sport*, 60–62.

1818 that children did not need leisure; and a Scottish minister claimed that a factory was the best place to discipline the youthful mind.⁶⁵

Not that traditional sports completely disappeared, just that they were increasingly frowned upon by many in the establishment and in the church, and a wedge driven between the emerging sports and the faith. In fact, through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries some sports began to be increasingly regulated, cricket and horse-racing most notably. Both of these sports were popular on both sides of the Atlantic.

Cricket is an interesting example because it both reflects more common trends and contradicts them. In 1611 two Sussex men were prosecuted for playing cricket when they should have been in church, but the sport is not mentioned in James' *Book of Sports*, suggesting it was not widely played. But by the end of the seventeenth century games played for significant stakes were not uncommon. In 1646 a game was played for a wager of candles, and at the end of the century for a winning prize of £75 per player, a huge sum which, if increased in line with retail prices index might be £8,000 in today's terms—and a dozen times that if increased in line with average earnings.⁶⁶ This was becoming big business, often stimulated by the entrepreneurial initiatives of inn-keepers who wanted an audience that would give them trade. Some games were billed as between representatives from counties, such as Kent and Surrey, while other more local games were played between village teams on local greens. By the early eighteenth century crowds often numbered in the thousands, and were as socially mixed as the teams. Players often included gentry and workers together, and cricket is notable for the way it has both allowed different social groups to come together and yet also found ways of separating them—by facilities for changing, by designation on scorecards, and by function.⁶⁷ The caricature of the laborer toiling over the hard work of bowling while the gentfolk specialized in batting has lingered even until today. Some laborers were hired by the squire more for their facility on the cricket pitch than for their skills on the estate, and the squire wanted a good team because of prize money and wagers. Cricket matches could take a long time, and in 1743 the *Gentleman's Magazine* reflected a Puritan attitude in suggesting that workers

65. See Brailsford, *British Sport*, 65.

66. See Birley, *English Cricket*, 14. For conversion of historic values in pounds sterling to today's values see *Measuring Worth*.

67. See Ellis, "Play up!" 250–52.

should not be distracted from providing for their families' livelihoods by playing. They might also have been concerned at the money being wagered on some results. Such betting did, however, have an interesting side effect: in order to avoid disputes about what counted as a fair result, rules needed to be agreed that might be the same from game to game. By 1744 several such rules were in place, and some grounds (like the Artillery Ground in London) had started charging admission, perhaps as much to keep out the riff-raff and prevent unruly behavior as to generate income.

It is generally accepted that ball games were not a significant part of early American games for a variety of reasons, including the rural nature of society; a tradition of individualism; and the religious objections to such amusements. When they were played they were often seen as children's rather than adults' recreation.⁶⁸ The religious objections are not unimportant. The tide began to turn in the middle of the nineteenth century, but in America as in Britain remnants of old objections lingered. Puritans continued to give off mixed messages: accepting restrained amusements that equipped one to work more heartily, but very suspicious of idleness and implacably opposed to gambling. Many of the elite, including those in the church and other opinion formers, still frowned upon physical recreations considering them at least potentially immoral, and also socially unacceptable. Even in the 1850s some American churches brought their members under discipline for taking part in ball games, including cricket.⁶⁹ Cricket was, in fact, very popular in pre-Civil War America. Clubs blossomed around Philadelphia and New York. The first international match in cricket took place between the USA and Canada in 1844, and local games were reported in the press. But after the Civil War cricket was eclipsed by baseball. Some said that cricket was unsuited to the American temperament, taking too long and being too formal.⁷⁰ It certainly wilted in the face of an intentional and commercialized promotion of baseball by Albert G. Spalding and others. As baseball became respectable, professional, and socially mixed, cricket in North America became increasingly the preserve of the elite, who jealously guarded its amateur status and traditional trappings as a way of protecting their own superior social status in a more socially fluid society.⁷¹

68. Kirsch, *American Team Sports*, 3.

69. Kirsch, *American Team Sports*, 11–12.

70. This was the argument of Albert G. Spalding in *America's National Game*.

71. See Kaufman and Patterson, "Cross-National Cultural Diffusion," 97–99.

As more games, like cricket, begin to be more regulated and made more uniform—become more like modern *sports*—the previously chaotic football games also begin to be ordered. Joseph Strutt, writing at the very beginning of the nineteenth century, describes how the lower classes of London had diverted themselves with football a hundred years earlier. But by his own time football appears to be taking on a more recognizable appearance for us. He describes a game with teams of equal size playing on a pitch a hundred yards long with a marked goal at each end. They “drive” the ball, an inflated bladder cased in leather, into their opponents’ goal in order to win the game. It can be still be a violent activity: “the players kick each other’s shins without the least ceremony, and some of them are overthrown at the hazard of their limbs.”⁷²

This more regulated football then proved a useful tool in the education of young men. What happened in the English public schools⁷³ was part of a wider social trend, but other factors were also at work: social control, and in time a particular idea of what makes a gentleman, and, indeed, a Christian. For in the nineteenth century something remarkable happens to Christian attitudes to sport.

In the nineteenth century public schools’ behavioral standards were poor, as middle-class teachers tried to constrain upper-class pupils. These pupils, left to their own devices, played the traditional games, letting off steam and breaking heads. So teachers began to suggest more regulated versions of these games, in time played on marked pitches with even teams, and so on. The boys enjoyed them, and teachers found them useful: they helped discipline, created team spirit, and channeled energy. Unruly boys now became lauded for achievement and responded well to praise. “Football” (understood very loosely) became the natural vehicle for this social molding because it was *relatively* free of associations with drinking and betting, and because it was fading in the cities due to practical difficulties with traditional formats and so had escaped censure from the new moralists.

The Victorians, or some of them, began to dissociate games from their traditional puritanical reservations, and see sport as virtuous, character-building, worthy. Sport was seen to have come to acquire positive moral qualities: embracing equal competition between equal numbers to well-known and published rules that had to be justly upheld. With

72. Strutt, *Sports and Pastimes*, 79.

73. In practice, places of private education.

the amateur ideal that provided much of the early ideology, sport had to be pursued for its own sake, without any pecuniary consideration. (Amateurism was never really about money as such: but about control and social separation.) Yet, played for itself, as a world entire to itself, part of the vision was that games, whether honestly won or lost, promoted individual strength of character and so served a national need. It is worth observing that, when the public schools were playing sports, physical education in schools for the less privileged provided only drill: what these pupils needed to learn was how to obey orders. The education system mirrored and reproduced the wider social system. While masters in public schools sought to inculcate manliness, strength, discipline, loyalty, and leadership, those in working-class settings were content to produce “troops who would be dutifully regimented and led.”⁷⁴

Public-school boys wanted to play their games after they left university and, from the middle of the nineteenth century when the new pastimes trickled down the social hierarchy, workers increasingly had Saturday afternoons free.⁷⁵ Various technological advances assisted the “sportification” process: the availability of travel, for players at first; the development of a sporting press to communicate results and speculation; the development and mass production of sports equipment.

Away from the schools the evangelical movement looked to parliament to legislate on a variety of recreational matters, including blood sports—and Sundays. Public museums and parks closed on Sundays, and Sabbatarian regulations were enforced. However, at the very moment of their greatest successes some evangelicals began to have second thoughts: could people be converted to Christ merely by being warned off vice, by a predominantly negative message about giving things up? Would the church lose its already tenuous connection with working people if it cramped their Sunday style? “Sport—a word that conjured up images of contemptible dissipation in 1830—was reinvented in the period after 1850. That it was not only accepted but grafted into a leading role in the Victorian assault on irreligion can only be described as revolutionary.”⁷⁶

74. See Brailsford, *British Sport*, 97.

75. The mill workers of Manchester were the first to win their Saturday afternoons off, in 1843 following a campaign begun by William Marsden. Over the next few decades the half-holiday became established and public parks (three in Manchester by 1847), libraries (following the Free Libraries Act of 1850 which allowed municipal authorities to support them), mechanics’ institutes’ lectures, choral societies, and church outings soon followed. See Hibbert, *The English*, 621–25.

76. Erdozain, *Problem of Pleasure*, 85.

The movement that became known as “Muscular Christianity” distanced itself from evangelical negativity about sports and drew on ideas from romantic writers, German and English. Like Coleridge, they came to see play as a sphere of moral growth. Like Schiller, they believed that play and the use of an aesthetically oriented imagination provided a check on reason which when left to its own devices produced the terrors of the French revolution.⁷⁷ The movement’s leader was Charles Kingsley, but its most well-known manifesto now is Thomas Hughes’ *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*, published in 1857. Kingsley challenged what he saw as the Manichaeism of evangelical thought, and made a connection between physical and moral well-being. The term Muscular Christianity was first used by an anonymous reviewer of Kingsley’s novel *Two Years Ago* in 1857.⁷⁸ It was not intended as a compliment, and Kingsley did not warm to the description. His friend Hughes was more positive and deployed the term in his sequel to *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*, the 1861 novel *Tom Brown at Oxford*.⁷⁹ The key ideas are, however, present in Hughes’ earlier work.

Hughes’ portrait of school life at Rugby connects games with moral fiber, heroism, and manliness, and (even if tenuously) with Christian virtue. In the actual schools, games had become embedded with remarkable rapidity, and sometimes seemed to take on a higher importance than the formal curriculum. Football became very important in this process, though with different variations at each of the schools initially: in one form the ball was mostly handled, whereas in another it was mostly kicked. Soon, far from being condemned by the church as “a freendly kinde of fight . . . A bloody and murthering practice,” it was promoted as character-building and virtuous.

Muscular Christianity was an extreme expression of a newfound confidence in sports, and this confidence was soon pervasive. The American narrative of Muscular Christianity takes a slightly different form, more obviously rooted in revivalism and more pragmatic rather than idealistic in its use of sport.⁸⁰ One of its key manifestations was in the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA). Founded by the London draper, George Williams, in 1844, its international spread began after the Great

77. Erdozain, *Problem of Pleasure*, 92–94.

78. *The Saturday Review*, February 21, 1857, 176–77.

79. *Tom Brown at Oxford* was first serialized in *Macmillan’s Magazine* before being published in book form.

80. See Ladd and Mathisen, *Muscular Christianity*.

Exhibition of 1851. Williams had been influenced by a leading American evangelical, Charles Grandison Finney, and exporting the YMCA to the USA could not have been a difficult process.

The YMCA began as a distraction from worldly recreations, but within ten years lecturers there were beginning to advocate the use of physical recreation as a way of providing an improving alternative to other readily available and less wholesome activities. God had given us all things to enjoy, they argued—the problem was not with sports but with their inappropriate use. Sports, properly understood, could be a weapon in the armory of the missionary. In 1864 the YMCA built its first gymnasium in Britain, and the USA would follow in the next decade. We are within reach now of positions that suggest that sport can be a way of glorifying God through celebration of the body. Luther Gulick urged the YMCA to adopt “body, mind, spirit” (recalling Deut 6:5) as the Association’s motto, and his thinking was that sports promoted a wholeness of development.⁸¹ Under Gulick’s direction, YMCA sports coach James Naismith created basketball in an effort to find a wholesome all-weather outlet for the energies of young men. Modern sports have usually evolved from primitive traditional games, but basketball was created *ex nihilo* and, it is worth noting, “for the sake of the gospel.”

The YMCA came to construct physical training as a religious activity, and trainers increasingly thought of themselves as essential workers for the kingdom of God.⁸² Churches in all the major denominations caught the mood too, making recreation a key tool of mission strategy. Such attitudes, though clearly of their time, nudge us towards considering sport in new ways theologically. However, when we come to consider the theological issues in a more focused way we will have to examine Erdozain’s suggestion⁸³ that something more sinister was going on here—in effect, sport supplying its own soteriology and becoming implicated in the processes of secularization. Was sport ceasing to be a means and becoming an end?

As well as its rehabilitation in religious or theological terms sport appears to be fulfilling a particular set of social or cultural needs in the later nineteenth century in the United States, and probably also in Britain,

81. Gulick is described as the YMCA’s greatest philosopher by Putney in *Muscular Christianity*, 71.

82. Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 72.

83. See Erdozain, *Problem of Pleasure*, 203–11.

such as the redefining of masculinity. Of course, it might be suggested that these social and cultural needs are some kind of unconscious driver in the religious or theological rehabilitation. Most of the developments in sport described so far took place initially at all-male schools or colleges. Just as games in the Southern colonies of America before the Revolutionary War seem associated with honor and masculinity, it would appear that nineteenth-century sport seems to be offering a new kind of articulation of what it means to “be a man.” *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* shows something of this, but it is no surprise that women were discouraged from engaging in sport because it was thought unfeminine. Sometimes brutal, sport could even be seen as a kind of proxy for war. As Gorn and Goldstein put it, “Athletics offered an opportunity for young men to get their first taste of glory, and for older men to renew the tingle of heroic combat.”⁸⁴ At Harvard, a donor contributed money for a sports ground called “Soldiers’ Field” to commemorate the dead in Civil War battles.⁸⁵ With faith under siege in the age of Darwin, it seemed to some as if all that was left was faith in a man’s honor, in the willingness to sacrifice for a good cause. Sports were like war: demanding duty, sacrifice, and all-out effort. After the frontier has been tamed, fortunes made, how are men to get in touch with vigor again, find something worth striving for? For some it might be in leading industry, through government office, and for others through participating in sports.⁸⁶ In Britain the rise of sports can be easily associated with elite schools and the expansion of leisure time; in the USA a case can be made that sees the rise of sports as meshing with a certain kind of entrepreneurial and pioneering spirit connecting with religious and patriotic themes.

By the 1860s a number of sports clubs had been formed on both sides of the Atlantic. In England, many of these had been founded by former public-school boys, and some also by churches. Peter Lupson credits this in part to the number of nineteenth-century clergy who had themselves attended the elite schools, as well as to the more pervasive adoption of a Muscular Christianity ideology. Writing in 2006, Lupson showed that about one third of the teams who had by then played in the

84. Gorn and Goldstein, *Brief History*, 140. In this regard Gorn and Goldstein refer to George Fredrickson, who argued that sport was becoming a moral equivalent of war in the 1890s.

85. The NFL stadium of the Chicago Bears was renamed Soldier Field in 1925 and originally had a similarly distinctive U-shaped design like the stadium at Harvard.

86. Gorn and Goldstein, *Brief History*, 143.

Football Association's Premier League had originated in churches, and about a quarter of all the football clubs founded in Birmingham between 1876 and 1884 had similar beginnings.⁸⁷

The eleven clubs who met in London in October 1863 to form the Football Association (FA) and to agree the first set of FA rules were making an attempt to address the need for greater uniformity. In time this led to the codification of both association football and rugby football—though in the early days clubs would often field teams to play by different sets of rules from week to week.⁸⁸ Something similar was happening in the Ivy League institutions in the second half of the nineteenth century in the USA. Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Rutgers played variations of soccer and rugby including games against touring English teams—sometimes playing with oval balls and sometimes with round ones.⁸⁹ The Americans found cricket less pliable, and turned increasingly to baseball.⁹⁰ But even after the 1871 publication of rugby union football rules brought some order and coherence to their games in England, the American players and coaches felt further improvements were possible—from 1880 additional changes saw the game evolve into what soon looked like modern American football.⁹¹

Through all these developments we see a different, positive attitude to sport from within Christian communities. The attack on sport made in the early church and by the Puritans clearly identifies issues over which we might still register some concern, and many of these were also known to the classical Olympians. The suspicion that sport fritters time away, is accompanied by other undesirable activities, and inculcates bad habits, is still not difficult to sustain. But from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards we see a potent counter position. Now sport is seen as an important tool in character formation for both individual and community,

87. Lupson, *Thank God for Football!*

88. These rules curbed running with the ball in hand, but some clubs played under both FA rules and the emerging “rugby” code. Football was the first pastime to use the Saturday afternoon slot—which lucky opportunism might partly account for its world dominance today.

89. Baker, *Sports*, 127f.; Guttman, *Sports Spectators*, 93–94.

90. Kirsch, *American Team Sports*, 28–42.

91. It may be no coincidence that Canadian football seems to have originated in Montreal and is associated with McGill University (i.e. a French rather than British city and university). The Canadians decided in 1882 to play on a larger pitch with twelve rather than eleven players per team, and the Canadian game still has these distinctives.

and as a vehicle for communicating the Christian faith. It is true that there is also a whiff of the desire for social control about some of this, and some Marxist critiques of sport often home in on this. But far from seeing sports as inherently bad (a position that even most Puritans did not occupy), they come now to be seen as at worst neutral vehicles through which social problems and personal development can be addressed, and faith nurtured; more positively, they could even be seen as divine gifts for human fulfillment or opportunities for a total dedication of mind and body to God's purposes. The "sports ministries" which are so much a feature of the contemporary sports-and-Christianity scene have their roots in the "conversion" to sport in the nineteenth century.

Conclusion

This chapter has not attempted to give a detailed and exhaustive account of the development of modern sport and the relationship of Christianity to it. Rather, the sketch offered has sometimes been impressionistic and always edited. It might be objected that what has actually been offered is not so much a history of sport as a prehistory, because (by my own definition) recognizably modern sport takes shape from the middle of the nineteenth century and this account has tailed off at precisely this point. Two justifications for this can be briefly put forward. Firstly, in the descriptions of the contemporary scene offered in the next chapter there will be an opportunity to look at aspects of the history of sport in the twentieth century that will effectively extend the narrative given here. Secondly, in terms of the church's general disposition toward sport little changes significantly after the late nineteenth century. It is true that some of the trajectories established there go in interesting directions as we shall see, but the basic qualified approval of what we might call the "Victorian religious settlement on sport" holds. The history of religion and sport up to our own time is marked by the three principal attitudes that we have observed in this narrative: one in which sport is seen as the vehicle for divine communion, a predominantly pre-Christian perspective, though one that has its parallels in the devotion often shown today to sport and in the quasi-religious way in which sporting experience is sometimes experienced by our contemporaries; another in which sports or, to be more precise, those practices which tend to come with sports, are treated with suspicion and even suppressed; and finally one in which sports are seen

as opportunities for character-building, community cohesion, and evangelism, as shown in Muscular Christianity or in a multitude of twentieth-century secular initiatives, often publicly funded. These three attitudes continue to exist, often unreconciled. An adequate theology of sport will perhaps see the valuable insights (and warnings) they each offer.

From the end of the nineteenth century, and remarkably soon after the beginnings of recognizably *modern* sports, the sporting experience begins to divide into elite and (often but not yet exclusively) professional sport on the one hand, and a more popular participatory sport on the other. Perhaps in truth, something like this divide is also as ancient as most sporting precursors. Elite sport is marked by large numbers of spectators, and by an escalation of commercial support. More popular and participatory sport might sometimes have seemed innocent but becomes increasingly competitive, commodified, and mimetic, being shaped by the experience of elite sport. Any theological account of sport will also have to discuss both of these different, though connected, manifestations of the sports phenomenon. It is to the experience of sport in our contemporary world that we must now turn.