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Playing with God: Religion and Modern Sport

WILLIAM J. BAKER, 2007

Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press

322 pp., US\$29.95, £19.95 (hb)

ISBN 978-0-674-02421-2

This scholarly and thought-provoking book is the latest in an increasing body of research and scholarship that examines the sport-religion interface. As the author of previous notable works on this topic (e.g. *If Christ came to the Olympics*), William J. Baker, Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Maine, is a recognised and respected voice on 'Playing with God'. The *need* for this book is established by Baker (1-2) in the Introduction, when he states that,

In the subuniverse of sport, Americans follow their favorite players and teams as though it were a matter of life and death ... public displays of piety abound at every level of sport in the United States. Elite professionals and amateur high school athletes point heavenward in celebration of touchdowns and home runs. Impeccably attired golfers and rough looking boxers have little in common but both share their glory with God. On baseball diamonds, football gridirons, and basketball courts, coaches and athletes engage in pregame and postgame prayers, earnest midgame gestures of supplication, and televised nods to God for game won.

In the light of these explicit links between sport and religion in the modern world that Baker identifies, serious scholarship and research by theologians and religious study scholars are sparse. This reluctance is undoubtedly rooted in the long-held notion of the sporting 'dumb jock' and the often unspoken scepticism by some members of the academic community about the need for, and academic integrity of, the discipline of sports studies. This scholarly book, written by an historian, will hopefully disaffect those with questions about the merits of academic reflection on the complex and pervasive sports world.

Although it is, predictably, the wealth of primary and secondary historical sources that are the strength of this book, I am most impressed with its interdisciplinarity. Nuanced insights into the psychological, sociological, and theological aspects of the way religion and sport interact and an accessible written style should attract readers from many academic disciplines as well as the educated lay person.

Through examining the ritualistic ball games of the primitive Mayan and Aztec peoples, the Greek Mythology of the Ancient Olympians during the classical period, *varied* levels acceptance and/or rejection of sport and games by the Puritan reformers, the birth of Muscular Christianity in nineteenth-century Victorian Britain, and the complex and dynamic symbiosis of sport and religion in the twenty-first century, Baker provides a comprehensive resource for high-school and university educators and students. The breadth of his analysis in 260 pages should not attract suspicions of weak scholarship. The author 'lets the

natives speak', using many powerful and insightful quotes to enrich the text, while maintaining academic distance in his analysis of some well-worn and yet superficial and/or controversial ideas about the intersection between sport and religion. The relationship between American evangelical Christianity and the 'big-business' culture of modern competitive sport is one example.

The often strange mix of American evangelical Christianity and the Lombardian (on oft-cited, yet misunderstood maxim) 'win-at-all-costs' ethic of elite sport is a topic Baker mines well, especially in Chapters 10 and 13. He challenges the often accepted 'character building' value of sport and the, at times, utilitarian evangelistic techniques of religious athletes and neo-muscular Christian organisations. For example, the way Barry Bonds, a New York Giants baseball star, "gives God 'the credit for his talent' by pointing to the sky after hitting 'homers', but uses 'these religious gestures' to cover-up for his 'refusal to deal honestly with the rumors and accusations surrounding performance-enhancing drugs' (258). As the book focuses primarily on American religion and sport, predictably, much space is given to an historical evaluation of the influence of Christianity and the Protestant work ethic on the modern sporting arena. However, there are helpful insights into the sub-culture of sport from an Islamic, Jewish, and Buddhist perspective.

Chapter 12 provides interesting reflections on how famed ex-Chicago Bulls basketball coach, Phil Jackson, adapted Zen Buddhist principles, mixed with Christian ideas of humility, honour, and sacrifice in his coaching and

managing of individuals and teams. Citing Jackson, Baker provides psychological insights into the use of Eastern and Western religious principles to enhance team spirit and individual performance: “The day I took over the Bulls ... I vowed to create an environment based on the principles of selflessness and compassion I’d learned as a Christian in my parents’ home...” and “Sitting on a cushion preaching Zen...” (245). Chapter 11, entitled “Athletes for Allah”, nicely captures the lives of well-known and controversial Muslim athletic icons, such as Mohammad Ali and Mike Tyson. Both converted to Islam during their flamboyant and often controversial careers and in various ways promoted their religion through the vehicle of sport. Baker does not shy away, however, from identifying the questionable affiliations (e.g. to the Nation of Islam), boastful antics, and moral misdemeanours of such athletes (of all religions) that starkly contradict the tenets of the faith traditions they profess.

In summary, I heartily recommend this book for its broad historical survey of the sport-religion relationship and its scholarly, accessible, and witty style. Recognising the challenging relationship between the ‘big money’, ‘win-at-all-costs’ culture of modern sport, Baker points us to what he sees to really matter in his closing comments. The simple story of Linda H. Flannagan, a female non-athlete and poorly paid high-school coach who works in a difficult New Jersey suburb and whose mostly anonymous work in sport, Baker (260) argues, personifies the religious ideals of humility, selflessness, self-sacrifice, honour, and respect. She “never once mentions God, Jehovah, or Allah, nor does

she bring Jesus into the picture. Yet she represents the healthiest, most wholesome features of a religious effort that began almost two centuries ago to bring God and sports together”.

NICK WATSON

*Centre for the Study of Sport and Spirituality, York St John University, York, England,
UK*

REFERENCE

Baker, William J. *If Christ came to the Olympics*. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2000.

William Baker's *Playing with God* is a natural. Baker reveals the countless ways that religious ideas infuse sports, and the complex ways that sports resemble religion. Along the way he tells great stories, and unearths a range of beliefs and practices across time and faiths. This is a fascinating history.

—Elliott Gorn, author of *A Brief History of American Sports*. No other book on modern religion and sport is as expansive, well-researched, or satisfying. Yet another touchdown by a former college quarterback!

—Benjamin G. Rader, author of *American Sports: From the Age of Folk Games to the Age of Televised Sports*. Book digitized by Google from the library of Harvard University and uploaded to the Internet Archive by user tpb. Topic: Science Source: <http://books.google.com/books?id=Z04AAAAAYAAJ&oe=UTF-8>. American Libraries. *Playing with God* book. Read 3 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. The spectacle of modern sport displays all the latest commercial an... Preview *Playing with God* by William J. Baker. *Playing with God: Religion and Modern Sport*. by. William J. Baker. 3.43 · Rating details. · 21 ratings · 3 reviews. Published April 1st 2007 by Harvard University Press. More Details Original Title. *Playing with God: Religion and Modern Sport*. ISBN. 0674024214 (ISBN13: 9780674024212). Start your review of *Playing with God: Religion and Modern Sport*. Write a review. Feb 26, 2016 Rick Wolff rated it really liked it. This book offers the broadest look at religion and sport from the nineteenth century to the present I have encountered.