Sport and Christianity in the 21st Century

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Introduction
Over the past 30-40 years there has been a steady growth in the academic literature concerning the relationship between sport and religion. [1] What this article aims to do is to map out the key features of this relationship focusing specifically on developments in the UK both during and since the Victorian period. To this end, we begin by addressing the formative and innovative role which the English public schools and the Protestant church in Britain played in the growth of sport. Our discussion then goes on to locate these developments against a wider cultural backdrop of nineteenth century social change. The subsequent decline of the relationship between sport and the Protestant church in the UK during the 20th century is acknowledged, but it is also argued that there are now signs of church growth and specifically sports ministry as a means of outreach, especially amongst young people. Accordingly, the final section of the article outlines how sports ministry workers may be seen to be re-engaging professionally in both church and non-church settings. [2]

Sport and the English Public Schools
A popular argument surrounding the relationship between sport and religion in Britain is that during the mid-19th century certain sporting activities were transformed from a collection of unruly pastimes into a series of structured and codified games via the English public schools. [3] This transformation, it is argued, primarily took place through the work of Thomas Arnold at Rugby school between 1828-1841. Arnold’s appointment to the position of Head Teacher at Rugby came at a time when wider criticisms prevailed of unruliness and disorder in the public schools; ‘evils’ which he resolved to remedy. Central to Arnold’s reforms was his desire to transform his pupils into ‘good Christian gentlemen’. The introduction of sport and physical activity into the curriculum at Rugby is seen as one of his most significant achievements. Yet the Arnoldian regime amounted to much more than games playing; an education in the ‘classics’ was regarded as the guardian of moral character, and the passing of responsibility to older pupils (prefects) as the gateway to discipline, respect and ‘Christian manliness’. Word of Arnold’s reforms - particularly the introduction of competitive games - travelled fast both inside and outside of the public schools with other educationalists following suit. One reason for the wider dissemination of Arnold’s ideas was the writings of two well known authors of the time, Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes.

Sport and Victorian Values
During the mid 19th century Charles Kingsley (clergyman, academic, novelist and poet), and his associate, Thomas Hughes (lawyer, politician and novelist), became key figures in the relationship between sport and religion. Most notable in this respect was Hughes’s 1857 book Tom Brown’s Schooldays, the story of a boy (Tom Brown) whose character is shaped by his educational experiences at Rugby school. The sense of high moral value and manly Christian endeavour embedded in the story-line of the book formed the basis of what came to be known as ‘muscular Christianity’, a term encapsulating notions of spiritual, moral and
physical purity. In reality muscular Christianity had at its roots in a number of broader social concerns prevalent at that time: the protection of the weak, the plight of the poor, and, perhaps most importantly, the promotion of moral virtue. The idea of developing spiritual and moral fortitude through physical endeavour resulted in the establishment of a series of values which, in time, came to underpin the relationship between sport and religion not just in the public schools but in society at large: fair play, respect, physical and emotional strength, perseverance, subordination, obedience, discipline, loyalty, self control, sacrifice, endurance, courage and esprit de corps. An example of how some of these values might come together can be seen in the 1980 film *Chariots of Fire*, where GB athlete Eric Liddell (a committed Christian) refuses to enter the 100 metres event at the 1924 Olympics because the heats are set to take place on a Sunday; Liddell went on to win bronze and gold medals in the 200 and 400 metres finals respectively. Likewise, these generic values are clearly articulated as underpinning features of the Olympic Games themselves. Indeed, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and of the modern Olympics was familiar with Thomas Hughes’ novels and, after visiting Rugby in 1883, was said to be heavily influenced by the work of Thomas Arnold.

It is important to locate the emergence of muscular Christianity against a broader social and cultural backdrop. The rapid onset of industrialisation in 19th century Britain stimulated significant changes in social life which, in turn, generated a series of fears over issues such as health, sanitation and welfare. This led to a desire on the part of the middle and upper classes to improve and refine both the fortunes and habits of ordinary working class folk; a movement which Holt and others have referred to as ‘rational recreation’. Rational recreation comprised the will of the social elite to reform society by re-directing the energies of the masses away from the vagaries of drinking, gambling and disorder and towards new forms of social behaviour. The Church was part of this process. During the mid-late 19th century it was not uncommon for clergy to be involved in sporting provision, a number being pro-active in the establishment of some of today’s high profile football teams. Employers had similar ideas with some providing sports facilities for their workers alongside more general encouragements to take regular exercise thereby aiding health and productivity.

**Sport and the Church: A new era?**

From the 1850s onwards, sports grew in popularity in Britain (both at a participatory and at a spectatorship level) and, as a consequence, the Church came to recognize the value of such pursuits both in terms of their social status and religious significance. It is clear, for example, that from the mid nineteenth century the Anglican church actively began to explore its sporting connections primarily out of a desire to eradicate the strong sense of ‘puritanism’ permeating its orbits. The post 1860s period witnessed a spectacular explosion of sport. By 1900 half a million or more played regularly in leagues. Church sports teams began to spring up all over Britain, although they were much more common among liberal than among evangelical churches. It has been estimated that in Birmingham between 1871-1880, 20% of the total number of cricket clubs and almost a quarter of association football clubs had connections with religious organizations.

Notwithstanding the level of tolerance demonstrated by some denominations in comparison to others, from 1850 onwards Protestantism in Britain had, at the very least, begun to accept sport as a legitimate lifestyle pursuit, all of which added to a broader secularization of the Church around this time. Needless to say, there were on-going debates around the role of sporting activity in church life, these fuelled largely by anxieties over the kinds of moral values and behavioural practices that sport promoted. Church leaders addressed these tensions in various ways but what seems apparent is that, irrespective of the underlying motives for the increased acquaintance of the church and sport, accompanying this was a more widespread concern for the health and welfare of the nation.
Sport and Protestantism post-1945

As the relationship between sport and the Protestant church grew stronger, muscular Christianity appeared in new and innovative guises. For example, the post-war period witnessed a significant rise in neo-evangelicalism on both sides of the Atlantic which brought with it a wide-range of sports mission organisations. [10] In 1945 the young Youth for Christ evangelist, Billy Graham, keen to make a stir at a YFC rally at which he was speaking, invited America’s then leading distance runner, Gill Dodds to compete against a local opponent and to talk about his Christian faith. It was partnership made in heaven with Graham utilising Dodds’ sporting fame to generate interest and appeal. [11] What Graham pioneered proved to be a new model of evangelical muscular Christianity which, over the next sixty years provided the focal point of the sport-religion relationship for Protestant America.

The Christian presence in American sport made further headway in the 1950s and 60s with the formation of Athletes in Action (AIA) and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA). FCA was founded in 1954 subsequently flourishing into a notable High School and coaches’ ministry. From its inception in 1966, AIA rapidly grew into a worldwide movement holding fast to its original mission statement to introduce athletes to Christ, and to subsequently use their profile as an evangelistic platform. As the number of evangelical Christians in US professional sport began to increase, so too did opportunities for sports chaplaincy. With the support of the commissioner of Major League Baseball, Bowie Kuhn, in 1974 Baseball Chapel was established to provide a chapel programme for all major league baseball teams with a minor league programme following in 1978. [12]

Alongside the blossoming of sports chaplaincy came a re-definition of sports ministry in the life of American churches via increasing investment in resources and full-time sports ministers. Whilst not as dramatic as in the US, sports ministry has also flourished significantly in the UK. During the post-1950s period the sporting activities of churches in Britain experienced something of a decline, so much so that by the 1980s many congregations had little, if any, involvement in what was one of the most popular leisure-time choices for young people in secular settings. However, by this time moves were afoot to re-establish the relationship between sport and the Church in Britain. In the mid 1970s, a delegation from the UK were invited to attend a sports ministry conference in the US. On their return they set up a Christian ministry for sport in the UK culminating in 1975 with the launch of the Christian Sportsmen’s Outreach. Over the next five years attempts were made to identify Christians in professional sport and by 1980 the movement had been renamed ‘Christians in Sport’ and registered as a charity.

Today the spectrum of the Christian community’s interface with sport in the UK is far-reaching, with around 35 different Christian organizations in the UK alone. [13] There are ministries focused on specific sporting activities such as Christian Surfers UK and Logos Golf Ministries. Sports Chaplaincy UK (formerly SCORE) specializes in promoting sports chaplaincy services among professional/elite and amateur athletes both by supporting specific sports and by offering chaplaincy to major events such as the Commonwealth and Olympic Games. [14] Indeed, a particularly significant development, in recent years, has been the increasing recognition of the potential of such events as evangelistic opportunities. Mega-event ministry (as we would recognise it today) effectively began in 1988 at the summer Olympics in Seoul, Korea and at the winter Games in Calgary, Canada. The initial focus was on the competitors themselves, along with those who came to watch the event live. In time the vision spread to encouraging the local church to use the interest generated in major events in their vicinity as a bridge to minister to the wider public. As the media revolution took hold, it became clear that approaches aimed at reaching people in the host nation could equally be applied to any city or country, when and where the event was given a
significant media profile. The largest Christian campaign to take place thus far at a major sports event was at the Sydney 2000 Olympic and Paralympic Games when approximately 45 denominations and para-church ministry groups participated, (along with 700 churches), to stage outreach across Australia.

**Sport, faith and academia in the 21st century**

The first hand experience of UK organisations in touch with church congregations is that interest in sport is now re-emerging, as is the role of sports/youth ministers, lay or ordained. Of course, in a sporting world where provision has to meet stringent professional health and safety, youth safeguarding, and technical coaching or management standards, it can no longer be administered or delivered by ‘amateurs’. In contrast to the public or commercial realms, or for Governing Bodies of Sport, historically there has been no accredited or formally recognised training for sports ministers or chaplains analogous to that which is available for coaches, administrators, sports facility managers or sports development officers. [15]

In recent years the University of Gloucestershire has developed a major Faculty of Applied Sciences training people in a range of health, physical activity and sport disciplines. The University’s formation had incorporated two theological colleges and a teacher training college specialising in religious education. One of its statutes requires it to ‘further faith’ in the county and region, unusual even among the 12 Institutes of Higher Education in the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities. In 2005, the second author was asked to explore the potential for a postgraduate course in sports ministry/outreach. Such courses were (and are) numerous in the US, over 60 being identifiable at Masters level, some dating back to the 1920s. Of nearly a hundred individuals and institutions contacted about the viability of such a course in the UK, not one expressed doubt over the need for accreditation and qualifications in this area; hence, planning went ahead.

The upshot of these initial explorations is that since 2007 the University of Gloucestershire has:

1. **Validated and launched two postgraduate courses** (Certificate and Diploma in Higher Education, and MA) in Sports Ministry and Sport Chaplaincy, [16] comprising a suite of compulsory and optional modules which are taught through a blend of short blocks and semester attendance. [17] The focus is on Christians working in and through sport for the development of individuals and communities. Modules involve units on theology, the development of sport via churches, and the history and sociology of sport. Optional modules cover a range of health, education, sports development and social science themes. Theology modules have been developed through a local partnership with Redcliffe College, whose degrees the University validates. [18]

2. **Negotiated bursaries to support students in approved projects**, funded by the Joseph Rank Trust, [19] a charity specialising in youth and church projects; a number of these support sports ministry and sports chaplaincy candidates, some in local (Gloucestershire) sports clubs and villages, others further afield.

3. **Appointed to a Chair in Sport and Christian Outreach** (the first author), with an initial grant aid from the AllChurches Trust.

4. **Assembled an Advisory Group to guide and promote the overall initiative** from key figures in UK sports and youth ministry, chaired initially by the University’s Chancellor, Lord Carey of Clifton (and former Archbishop of Canterbury), and latterly by Revd. Dr Stuart Burgess, former UK government Rural Champion.

5. **Established the Centre for the Study of Sport, Spirituality and Religion (CSSR)**, the only research centre of its kind in Britain and Europe. [20]
6. **Sought funding for research** to undertake the mapping of faiths involvement in sport to help fill the gap in related research, and examining through case studies how particular programmes work, whether single denomination/faith or ecumenical/interfaith or with secular partners.

7. **Sought to make links with agencies both church based and secular** such as: the Association of Church Sport and Recreation Ministers (CSRM) in the USA, [21] the International Sports Coalition, [22] Sport England, Sporting Equals, the Local Government Association, Home Office [23], and Departments of Culture Media and Sport and Communities and Local Government.

Teaching and research in this area requires rigorous scholarship in order to support and maintain its development as a field of academic enquiry. More texts are emerging on the theology of sports ministry, [24] and its practicalities [25] including chaplaincy in soccer clubs. [26] In turn, the *International Journal of Religion and Sport* was launched by Mercer University Press in 2009.

**Conclusions**

Throughout the preceding discussion our intention has been to present an overview of the way in which the relationship between sport and Christianity has developed in the UK over the past 150 years. [27] Given all of the above, how, we might ask, should we begin to think about future work in this area? For sure, there is evidence to suggest that, in the UK at least, the vestiges of evangelical negativism towards sport remains. It is true, for example, that some churches and church leaders still see sport as something which detracts from (or counters) spiritual growth and maturity. On the other hand, sport, as a specific area of ministry, has witnessed something of a resurgence in the UK in recent years and is now an established field of outreach both within church and para-church organisations and within secular settings. Likewise, those involved in sports ministry at a national level continue to forge forward in relation to establishing a presence in elite sport and within the context of mega-events; this is presently evidenced in and through the operationalisation of the 'More than Gold' strategy, the interdenominational organisation coordinating the Christian community's involvement with the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games in London. [28]

On a broader scale modern-day sports ministry also has a host of practical matters with which to deal. The culture of 21st century secular sport is such that moral and ethical issues feature large amidst the day-to-day processes of participation, spectatorship and media commentary, all of which have the potential to manifest themselves, to some degree or another, within the context of church-based sports programmes. Likewise, nowadays Sunday church attendance often competes for the attentions of those wishing to play sport in secular circles; youth football’s move to Sunday mornings in the 1990s being a prime example of how such tensions and dilemmas may arise. Nevertheless, the popularity of sport (especially as an aspect of youth culture) continues to grow and, in this sense, one of the greatest challenges facing sports ministry workers (and those who educate and train them) is to provide a quality of service in this area which competes with and surpasses all that the secular world has to offer. Indeed, it is to keep pace with secular sporting provision, whilst distancing itself from the moral dissonance which it often promotes, that is arguably the most pressing challenge for modern-day sports ministry.

**Notes**


10. For a more detailed picture of the development of the sports ministry both in the UK and the US in the post-1945 period, see: Ladd and Mathisen, *Muscular Christianity*.


12. Of course, such progress has not gone without criticism. See, for example, T. Krattenmaker, *Onward Christian Athletes: Turning Ballparks into Pulpits and Players into Preachers*, (New York, Rowman and Littlefield, 2010).

13. For further details of this network see the web site of UK Sports Ministries: http://uksportsministries.org/

14. For further details see: http://www.sportschaplaincy.org.uk/


16. For more information, see: http://www.glos.ac.uk/courses/postgraduate/scm/Pages/default.aspx

17. Sports chaplaincy provision has been developed specifically in association with Sports Chaplaincy UK (formerly SCORE).

18. For more information, see: http://www.redcliffe.org/

19. For more information, see: http://www.ranktrust.org/

20. See http://www.glos.ac.uk/research/dse/cssr/Pages/default.aspx

21. For more information, see: http://www.csrm.org/

22. For more information, see: http://www.intersports.org/


27. For critique and comparison of the varying approaches to sport by the Protestant and the Roman Catholic church see: S.J. Hoffman, *Sport and Religion*, and Ladd and Mathisen, *Muscular Christianity*.

28. See: http://www.morethangold.org.uk/
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