

Between Active AND Contemplative

The Co-mingling of Sports, Recreation and Christian Theology

BY ANTHONY MARANISE

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TERRI SCOTT

Located inside the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City are breathtaking feats of architecture and design. One likely to inspire conversation is the cathedral's great Sports Bay window installed in 1924 after the Paris Olympics. From nearly floor to ceiling, stained glass depicts sporting and recreational activities from the more ancient running, chariot-racing and archery to the more modern football, basketball, soccer and baseball. One may initially find this display an odd facet for a sacred and liturgical space like the cathedral, which has a blended Gothic-Romanesque architectural style. However, it becomes less surprising when one considers the ways and means in which sports and recreation captivate nearly all aspects of human life.

Sports and Recreation in Christian History

It would be irresponsible to neglect the influence of ancient Greek philosophy on the thought and development of sports and recreation in Christian history. Sports are, quite naturally, embodied activities. Humans animate and "give life" to every aspect of the sporting and recreational world. The human body is crucial for the very existence of sports and recreation. The ancient Greek philosophers, however, viewed the body as less significant than the dimension of existence Christians might regard as the soul. It was even an impediment to the spiritual experience. The soul, which could encounter the divine, was imprisoned within the body, and strict ascetic practices that disciplined the body were the means of overcoming the body so that the soul might prevail. The ancient philosophers felt that contemplation offered the opportunity to experience transcendence and so it was valued more highly than activity of the body. Fast forward several thousand years. As Christian theology further developed and religious influence spread, this ancient notion would come to be viewed as holding little weight due to the importance of the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ.

Because God saw fit to become human in Jesus, Christianity began to regard the body and the soul as having a substantially important compatibility. In his letter to the Romans, St. Paul alludes to the importance

of the Incarnation saying, “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, then we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Romans 6:5). The future resurrection of humans will occur not only in terms of a spiritual renewal but also in a literal sense—in a physical body. This emphasis on the importance of the body was a major theological and historical theme for St. Paul and the source from which much of Christian spirituality and theology related to sports and recreation has established its foundation.

In one passage, widely known to Christian sports and health enthusiasts, St. Paul writes, “Do you not know that your body is a temple ... therefore glorify God in your body” (1 Corinthians 6:19–20). While St. Paul was admonishing the Corinthians to avoid misuse of their bodies for various immoral activities, this statement and his numerous athletic metaphors (1 Corinthians 9:24–26, Galatians 2:2 and 5:7, Philippians 2:16, 2 Timothy 2:5 and 4:7) has encouraged many Christians to see Paul’s view of sport as favorable.

Action and Contemplation: A Synthesis

The fifth century founder of Western monasticism, St. Benedict of Nursia, penned a Rule for the daily lives of those who sought deeper communion with God. Ultimately, he believed that prayer and work were not separate from one another, but indissolubly bound. Further, his Rule for monasteries espoused that the combination of both action and contemplation led to a balanced, fulfilling, peaceful and generally good life. It is not too far a stretch to assert that prayer can be likened to contemplation, and sports and recreation to action.

The active life refers to “a life devoted to the service of God through service to his created beings.”¹ Fundamentally, this sort of “lived-spirituality” is at the crux of what

Jesus meant when he explained, “... just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40). This sort of life lends itself toward explicit interaction with other persons and might be best encapsulated by the phrase, “love of neighbor.”

Conversely, if one is contemplative, while life does not exclude a sense of community or interaction with others, primarily it focuses attention inwardly toward a heightened experience or deeper, almost mystical, communion with God. Christian theology and history has been





The Sports Bay window at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine in New York City depicts over two dozen ancient and modern sports including baseball, fishing, golf, auto racing, figure skating, bowling, and basketball (shown here in detail).

generally in debate over which life path is truly a better means of coming into deep relationship with and experience of God. Theologically speaking, contemplation is so valuable because only through it are we ever able to ascribe significance or value to our physical actions. What theological significance, then, can we ascribe to our participation in sports and recreation?

Toward a Working Theology of Sports and Recreation

We are embodied human persons. Apart from our bodies, we would have no interaction of a physical nature. Essential, then, to our being are our bodies, for which we must care.

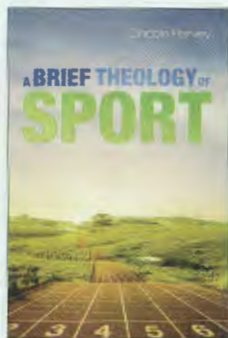
Of course, human beings cannot survive and thrive successfully alone. We do not exist in a vacuum, and thus interaction that necessitates the development of a relationship is part of what it means to be authentically human. While relating to other persons is certainly necessary in sporting life, relationship to God is the lens by which human relationships can be properly viewed. All Christian traditions, regardless

of denomination, acknowledge that humans possess “an inherent, inviolable dignity that is imprinted in our being by God” and one “that must be respected and never taken away.”² Bearing this in mind, we must acknowledge “that sport is a means of celebrating our own human identity, an occasion to realize ourselves as women and men fully alive.”³ Participation in sports and recreation, then, afford us an opportunity not only to relate to other human beings, but to experience a divine foretaste of the glory to come in the next life by relating contemplatively to God.

Our actions make up the final facet of any constructive spirituality. Operating off of this view of a divine merger, between the active and the contemplative, I would assert that sports and recreational activities provide this happy medium or this long sought after balance between both realms of the lived-spiritual life. Whenever we have become completely caught up in something we enjoy we may lose track of time, or even become unaware of what else has happened around us. In times of deep interest in our action (whether playing a particular

SPORT AND HUMANITY

A review of *A Brief Theology of Sport* by Lincoln Harvey



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Imagine the scene: a group of people gather together each week. They wear special clothes for the event, have special rituals they enact each time they gather together, and may even sing special songs together. As they settle down to focus on the action at hand and watch events unfold, they find themselves emotionally connected to what is happening. They experience collective highs and lows and the impact of the event stays with them throughout the course of the next week.

Now ask yourself: is this a group at a church service? Or

a group of fans watching a major sporting event? And don't these two groups seem strangely similar?

To Lincoln Harvey, these groups are similar, as he discusses in his book, *A Brief Theology of Sport*. A self-described “sports enthusiast,” Harvey aims to give the reader a framework for understanding why we love sports and challenges Christians to think beyond the questions of paying professional athletes enormous sums of money, or using church leagues as a way of evangelism. Rather he argues that sport “expresses the heart of our true identity” and should be enjoyed purely

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sport, watching it as a spectator, praying, or simply laughing with good friends), we have experienced the heights of contemplation. And to that I would add, we have experienced that heightened contemplation within the performance of an action. In those moments when we lose ourselves in the performance of an activity, it is as though “we can glimpse

what the vision of Our God must be like that takes us outside of ourselves into the very Trinitarian depths of God while

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1. Holmes, Emily A. “The Active & Contemplative Life in Christianity.” Christian Spirituality, RS 324 Undergraduate Course. Christian Brothers University, Kenrick Hall, 208, Memphis, TN, 19 Oct. 2008. Lecture.
2. Wadell, Paul J. “Every Person’s Truth.” *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life: An Introduction to Christian Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008) 77.

3. Australian Catholic Social Justice Council. “A Crown That Lasts Forever.” *Striving for the Best in Our Sporting Nation* (Sydney: Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 2014), 15.
4. Schall, James V. “On Play and Sports.” *Reasonable Pleasures: The Strange Coherences of Catholicism* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2013), 86.

for sports sake. Sport, like creation, is “essentially unnecessary yet meaningful.” Creation is unnecessary because God did not need to create humankind for survival, but the Creator did so because “God is love.” Sport, a form of play, is not necessary for men and women the way eating, drinking and sleeping are; sport is meant for their enjoyment. Therefore, Harvey argues, “Worship is the liturgical celebration of who God is. Sport is the liturgical celebration of who we are.”

Harvey precedes this argument with a thoughtful examination of sport in the ancient, classical, and medieval eras, and he looks at how the church historically has sought to reconcile widely popular sports in light of its theology, oftentimes opposing sports. These chapters give the reader the context needed to understand how deeply entangled religion and sport have been in the past while we examine how the church should be involved in the present.

allowing us to remain the human persons that we are.”⁴

In *Letters and Papers from Prison*, German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “All Christian thinking, speaking, and organizing must be born anew out of prayer and action.” Rabbi Abraham Heschel said, “I pray with my legs as I walk.” In sporting and recreational activities, given the ways in which we are able to discover our true human identities, relate to God, and consecrate our work of training, play, or physical exertion to a cause greater than our own, it is safe to say that there is a blessed unity of that very prayer and action.

The book’s chapters are self-standing, and with each topic Harvey thoughtfully prepares the reader for his arguments, while making a point to let us know how it fits with the findings of the previous chapters. This makes it an easy book to jump in from chapter to chapter.

A Brief Theology of Sport is a delightful, thought-provoking, and insightful read, and prepares the reader for further thought, discussion, or research. It would be a good book for anyone interested in examining sports, its history and the church. All you need is an appetite to explore a greater meaning in the world’s favorite pastime, sports.

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