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April 12, 2016

Religious Dimensions in Sport

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An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
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Bachelor of Arts with Honors

Department of Religion

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Abstract

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This honor thesis contributes to the on-going debate amongst religious scholars about topics in popular culture, like sports, that produce so-called religious behaviors and experiences. In America, recent trends in data and literature reflect Americans' waning engagement with institutional religion and growing interest/investment in sports and other forms of entertainment. While this paper does not assert these two patterns are causal, it does lay a theoretical groundwork that accounts for these changes in a religious landscape. By explaining the cultural conditioning of the European Enlightenment and thus, the Western academy, I show why critical terms and categories in religious studies such as "religion," "religiosity," and "religious experience," must be de-shackled from their ecclesiastic ties and applied to valid and analogous forms of religious life in sport and culture. This sets up an examination of American sports as a minor element of American civil religion. Here, the Super Bowl is treated as a religious festival to analyze the sanctification of American sports. However, sport is not just sacred during the Big Game. It's also memorialized everyday in branding campaigns, television broadcasts, and media coverage. The final analysis of this thesis presents several theories supporting the fundamental union of sports and religion. Violence, ritual, and sacrifice are the core components of this discussion. This thesis concludes that religion, as a social fact, has a variety of elements that can be reenacted, reconstructed, and reiterated in many different cultural forms. Because of this, sports can have a religious appeal that allows for religious experiences too occur. Therefore, in American culture and foreign communities, sports are effectively redefining the borders and contours of religious life and landscapes.

Keywords: sports, religion, religious, religiosity, religious experience, American civil religion, popular religion, community, culture, football, Super Bowl, National Football League (NFL), branding, media, military, sanctification, memorialization, violence, rituals, sacrifice, mythmaking, surrogate-victim mechanism, sacrificial crisis, sacred, profane

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Acknowledgements

This honors thesis would not have been possible were it not for Gary Laderman, my thesis adviser. His support for my scholarly interests in religion, from sophomore year to senior spring, has been positively unconditional. Were it not for him, my confidence and capabilities as a thinker and writer would be profoundly less. Thank you for inspiring me to write this thesis.

I also want to thank Michael Berger, a committee member, close mentor, and First Colleague. As the instructor of REL 490 in the fall, he brought me into contact and conflict with some of the hottest debates afoot in the academic study of religion. He helped to spark my passion and perspective for the theories of this paper and future papers. This is a life-long gift!

In addition, I would like to thank Judd Owen, a committee member from political science. If I had not taken his course on Nietzsche, or if I had but he had failed to translate Nietzsche's aphorisms clearly into laymen's terms (which is a very difficult thing to do), my ambition for writing this thesis and for contributing to scholarship in general would be weaker. Thank you to my whole committee for making this the most meaningful part of my undergraduate education.

My experience as a major in the religion department has been a miracle-and-a-half. There are several people I'd like to thank for making religion a personal and professional interest:

Joanna Greer Premand, my comparative religion teacher from senior year of high school. In her class, religion transformed from something we just observe into something we can learn from. Heading to Emory, I wanted more...

Tara Doyle, my first religion professor at Emory, who taught Modern Buddhism and Social Change. She became my academic adviser and led me into Geshe Lobsang's Secular Ethics of the Dalai Lama course in which His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama guest lectured! This vacuumed me into Emory's one-of-a-kind summer study abroad in India. There, I met Dr. Arri Eisen and the Dalai Lama again. All these people, places, and experiences enriched my drive for knowledge and academic achievement in the study of religion. Thank you, it's been a blessing.

I'd like to recognize my beloved family, friends, and fellow students. Throughout the entire process you all have been better supports than I could ask for. Thank you to my twin, Eli Goodman, for pushing me to the end. Knowing we had the same goal made writing an honors thesis a lot better than expected. Our morning swims gave me the best brain juice possible. Cheers and safe travels in Columbia. And don't forget...once a scholar, always a scholar.

Mom, thanks for making me feel like I'm omniscient. Dad, thanks for making me feel like I have some more thinking and explaining to do. Finally, to my Grandma and Grandpa, Merle and Marshall Goldman, thank you for living the lives you love, the lives of academics. Being your grandson has motivated and shaped me in profound and scholastic ways. This honors thesis is but one of the many academic works that your professional careers continue to inspire.

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INTRODUCTION

Super Bowl XLIX, played February 1, 2015 between the New England Patriots and Seattle Seahawks, recorded the highest mark of television viewership in American TV history with over 114 million viewers.¹ By the time millions of people tune into the game's broadcast, billions of dollars have already been spent or bet on the game.² Each year, Super Bowl Sunday is celebrated by millions across the country, many of who have no vested interest in the game's outcome. Regardless, they gather with strangers, friends, and family to participate in and experience one of America's modern and most distinguished traditions. In America, the Super Bowl is just one example of how sport has penetrated popular culture and ascended the ranks of mass media.³ The formation of professional sports teams and their followers in America are among a host of cultural activities that sociologists and religious studies academics characterize as religious.⁴ Since the social and cultural ascent of sport in America in the post-World War II era scholars have studied the formations and impacts of sport in America and described its effects as religious.⁵ In the field of religious studies, some academics compare the categories of religion and sport through analysis of their similarities, while others reject any comparison and/or equation of the two.⁶ This cultural analysis investigates religious dimensions across each category through offering a social theory of religion, sport, and their elements' interplay in

¹ TV by the Numbers, and Sports Media Watch.

² Peltz. Analysts predict that over \$4 billion was wagered on Super Bowl 50... "The Super Bowl is widely considered the biggest single American sporting event for gambling."

³ Goodell. After Super Bowl XLIX, the next five most-watched TV programs in U.S. history are the Super Bowls from the 5 years prior (NBC Sports). In addition to the Super Bowl's record-setting viewership, "Sunday Night Football" is the top-rated show on television.

⁴ Price, "An American Apotheosis: Sports as Popular Religion."

⁵ Markovits, Hellerman, Chapter 2, "The Formation of the American Sport Space: 'Crowding Out' and Other Factors in the Relegation and Marginalization of Soccer."

⁶ As will be shown, in describing religious content some scholars use these categories of religion in quotation marks while others do not. In this paper, I will generally use these words without quotations but will use them in some contexts.

American popular culture.⁷ This also suggests a wider, more meaningful discourse on how to study and use terms like religion, religiosity, and religious experience in the context of culture.⁸

In order to achieve this, I must explain how social and cultural formations outside the traditional walls of religion constitute religiosity and create experiences that are described as religious. While this approach opens the door for other cultural activities and social categories like music/concerts or entertainment/‘cult movies’ to be included in the debate, this paper focuses on sport in American culture. In this paper I first walk through the theory, terms, and debates that shaped my engagement with this topic and that informed my understanding of the concepts of religion and religiosity. Second I break down the category of “religious experience” to grasp its meaning so that I can explore if and how an experience holds religious value for a practitioner/participant of cultural activities, like a sport fanatic at a ballgame or a Grateful Dead fan at one of the band’s concerts.⁹ Next, I discuss the role of media in branding and sanctifying sport in America, specifically football. This includes studying the National Football League’s (NFL) Super Bowl as a theatrical event and religious festival in America that constitutes religiosity and creates religious meaning for viewers through ritual aspects, mass gatherings, and cultural myths. Finally, I describe how ritualized violence in sport solidifies and strengthens its sacred nature and its sacrificial rites. Combined, these factors present compelling reasons for scholars to engage with the substantial narrative of sport’s religiousness and for them to be aware of this growing phenomenon in their works on popular culture and religion. At its most basic level, this paper suggests an uncompromising degree of connection and overlap between sport and religious dimensions.

⁷ Higgs, 20.

⁸ Beneke, Remillard, “Is Religion Losing Ground to Sports?”

⁹ Laderman, “The Future of Religion Is... The Dead.”

TERMS & THEORY

Before explaining the religious dimension of sport in America I will review the claims and analyses of scholars who contributed to the theoretical evolution and development of this paper's argument. The critical terms which will play a role in this discussion are provided by scholars who oppose giving essential definitions to words like religious, religion, and religions. This tendency reflects scholarly concerns over the evolution and process of reification the term religion underwent in the West, which involved "mentally making religion into a thing," while "gradually coming to conceive it as an objective systematic entity."¹⁰ Although this concept of "religion" started in the ecclesiastical West, especially in Protestant theological circles, it soon developed and spread to include "the religions" of the world.¹¹ For this reason some academics object to the homogenous identities or essences that are attached to heterogeneous categories like religion and/or particular religious traditions or legacies, such as Hinduism and yoga.¹² Therefore, academics argue that the scholarly interpretation of religious institutions, practitioners, behaviors, and experiences should not be confined to a relatively parochial prism for understanding the complex, diverse, and evolving social processes of religion.

This theory is embodied in the works of scholars like Russell McCutcheon and W.C. Smith. In the book, *Critics Not Caretakers: Redescribing the Public Study of Religion*, McCutcheon implores scholars to stop privileging the academic study of religion by caretaking for the subjects of its studies, the insiders or practitioners of religion. Caretaking, according to McCutcheon, occurs when the term

¹⁰ W.C. Smith, 51.

¹¹ W.C. Smith, 51-79: Chapter Three, "Other Cultures. 'The Religions.'"

¹² Nicholson, 495. In his essay "Is Yoga Hindu?; On the Fuzziness of Religious Boundaries," Nicholson encourages the reader to build an understanding of yoga's modern and historical forms that avoids categorizing its existence and varieties within our modern philosophic and religious denominations. To support this argument he points out that "what we now think of as 'Hindu yoga' mixed with the Islamic practices of the Sufis" from the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries in Northern India (499). This is why he urges caution, because modern attempts to interpret and remold distant pasts run the risk of including non-historical elements or projections that undermine the reality of the past and modern access to knowledge.

religion is designated as *sui generis*, which means in it of itself, or is determined to have an essential quality that can be categorized and compared. Instead of abolishing the category religion, McCutcheon is concerned with bringing more awareness to scholars when they reference the term. To bring about this awareness he engages in redescriptive scholarship, which “avoids presuming a perfect fit between the concepts we use and the world we encounter through those concepts.”¹³ McCutcheon prefers his purely sociological theory of “social formation” to redescribe groups and activities that may or may not be labeled as religious or as a religion.¹⁴ Another scholar, W.C. Smith, argues in *The Meaning and End of Religion* that the term religion ought to be dropped from scholarly and religious discourse and be replaced by the two terms, “tradition” and “faith.”¹⁵ These alternative labels for religion are another form of redescriptive scholarship aimed at perfecting the modern conceptual framework for studying and interpreting religion. When applied, these arguments impact the modern study of religion by undoing and dissociating ties between the study of religion and Christian theology, mainly Protestantism.¹⁶ This approach calls for relentless awareness of the use of religion and its adjectival forms so that the words’ cultural implications of reification are avoided. While the primary purpose of this paper is not to leverage the arguments of these scholars, it is to make claims on the possible domains of religion and religious life, specifically to consider the extension of religiosity to sport. In order to accomplish this, religion must be understood beyond the veil of reification.

¹³ McCutcheon, 23-27. McCutcheon borrows the term *redescription* from Jonathan Z. Smith in his essay “Sacred Persistence: Toward a Redescription of Canon” (1982: 36-52). Before using redescriptive tactics, McCutcheon clarifies its role in the academy, “Applied to the study of religion, redescription sums up the complicated work of scholarship, work that a former generation thought simply involved accurate or nuanced descriptions of what was simply given or that which presented itself.”

¹⁴ McCutcheon, 26. McCutcheon advocates a redescriptive approach to the term ‘religion’ and therefore considers the category ‘religious formation,’ as used by his colleague Catherine Albanese (1996: 734), problematic. This is so because his category “social formation,” rejects a *sui generis* notion of religion, which suggests “that there is nothing specifically religious, spiritual, or mystical about the social groupings we describe as religions or world religions.” Through redescribing the landscape of religious phenomena, McCutcheon is able to avoid implicating reified meanings and/or *sui generis* notions in his scholarship.

¹⁵ W.C. Smith, 54. Like McCutcheon, Smith mainly objects to the term “religion” because of its reification process. The two terms Smith offers, tradition and faith, represent redescriptive scholarship as well.

¹⁶ McCutcheon, 22.

Another issue in scholarly discourse occurs when the term religion is intended and treated as *sui generis*, or in it of itself. After reading McCutcheon and Smith, who reject notions of *sui generis* religion in their approaches to religious studies scholarship, there seemed a need to address this theology before extending my social theory of religion to sport. Whereas social-scientific inquiry describes the social origins and observable products of subjects in society (i.e. an outside-in approach), the idea of *sui generis* religion clings to an inside-out theology and undermines the sociological weight and function of religiosity in culture.¹⁷ Once I studied these methodologies and comprehended their underpinnings, I saw the treatment of *sui generis* religion as a protective, privileging move that scholars, theologians, and clergy use to care-take for a practitioner's perspective or an insider's religious experience.¹⁸ For something to be *sui generis* means it has a unique, irreducible nature that is "of its own kind."¹⁹ Therefore, when subjects are assigned the adjective, *sui generis*, the implication is that they hold inimitable nature or inherent value. While the application of *sui generis* to religion may be of personal consequence and benefit to a handful of scholars and laypeople, its use seems to narrow rather than widen opportunities for further social scientific research and intellectual understanding of religion and religious phenomena. If the academic field of religious studies is to be taken seriously in the university, "the intellectually and politically suspect notion of *sui generis* religion," ought to be abandoned and social-scientific, generic methods of inquiry should become the norm.²⁰ Like McCutcheon and Smith, many scholars use critical terms for religious studies to make a case against *sui generis* religion and for the opening of scholarly discourse to more robust social scientific approaches in the public study of religion. These arguments allow for a proper description of religion, as a social fact that can be analyzed and governed by the same rules or assumptions as other fields. In

¹⁷ Frey, Eitzen, 105.

¹⁸ W.C. Smith, 102.

¹⁹ Simpson and Weiner, *The English Dictionary English Dictionary*.

²⁰ McCutcheon, 26.

effect, this approach demands recognition of and inquiry into analogous cases or claims of religion/religious life in popular culture.²¹

One academic who has impacted scholarship to this effect through his writings on civil religion is American sociologist, Robert Bellah. He defines American civil religion as the subordination of the nation to ethical principles that transcend judgment and provide an activist and non-contemplative conception of fundamental religious obligation.²² Bellah's modification of religion to "civil religion" is significant because it suggests the origins and processes of religion are not limited to religious institutions but expand into analogous contexts in civil society and popular culture (i.e. cultural religion). To be clear, this is not the same as merely applying the term religion to cultural activities like sport. However, depending on context and presentation sport could very possibly embody an element or principle of a civil religion. Later in the paper this relationship between sport and civil religion will be investigated in the case of football in America. Regardless of which term is employed in the study of religion (i.e. sacred, civil, cultural), the content of study must always be understood within a social scientific framework. The utility of this approach is "its ability to avoid the traps of reification" and to constantly show that religion is an ongoing, interactive societal process that is culturally descriptive and socially dependent.²³

In order to identify and critique what contributes to Bellah's concept of civil religion, defining "religiosity" is important. To better understand religiosity, Christopher Chesnek, applies theories of naturalism, which is the "idea or belief that only natural (as opposed to supernatural or spiritual) laws and forces operate in the world."²⁴ This leads him to define "religiosity" as a person/"seeker"

²¹ In the case of studying sport from a religious studies angle, this theory has already produced lots of scholarship and discourse. This approach might best be summarized in the common phrase across this literature, "from the pews to the bleachers."

²² Robert Bellah, "American Civil Religion."

²³ McCutcheon, 27.

²⁴ Simpson and Weiner, *The Oxford English Dictionary*.

interested and open to questions about human sciences and existential material.²⁵ His definition of religiosity extends beyond “belief in the supernatural” to include an interest in questions of meaning, purpose, value, and practice. Historically and today, these questions are engaged by social institutions and formations, which do not explicitly engage with the supernatural.²⁶ Given this link between religiosity and openness to existential material, there is renewed value in studying areas of culture that produce behaviors and experiences that impact lifestyle, identity, and faith.²⁷ Some scholars have described this as “participatory fandom”²⁸ and cite social activities and formations like sport teams, Dragon Con, environmentalist groups, and J.R.R. Tolkien enthusiasts.²⁹ The meanings and conceptual interpretations of these terms in culture are critical to this paper’s theory and defense.

As I seek to theorize and analyze sport from the field of religious studies, Chesnek’s position opens up more theological worldviews to consider in my study of religion beyond reductionism and antireductionism.³⁰ In the literature I have researched thus far, sociology tends

²⁵ Chesnek, 56.

²⁶ Deford, 90

²⁷ Chesnek, 48. In his essay, “Our Subject ‘Over There?’ Scrutinizing the Distance Between Religion and Its Study,” Chesnek understands and defines religiosity in a way that provides useful insight for my paper’s theoretical framework and argument. Like him, I critique and challenge the view that “belief in the supernatural” is the main qualification for religiosity or a religious experience.²⁷ Unlike him, I argue that sport is within the limit/criteria for religiosity. Chesnek’s expanded interpretation of religiosity focuses on the “seeker” of the “existential,” not the person with “faith” in a certain [world] religion. While he may indeed limit extending religiosity to sport, my cultural analysis leaves open the possibility that questions about human sciences and the existential are addressed in all social formations and cultural activities.

²⁸ Katherine L. Fleming, 7-9. She uses “participatory fandom” as a lens to approach and study the nexus of popular culture activities, membership, and social formation. Her analysis centers on the annual DragonCon festival in Atlanta. She presents different definitions of “fan.” One is from its Latin root, *fanaticus*, which means “of or belonging to the temple, a temple servant, a devotee.” She then cites four qualities that make someone a “fan;” 1) Emotional affinity 2) Self-identification 3) Imitation 4) Projection (Tudor, 97). These definitions help shape both early and modern understandings of “religious” participation and membership in topics of popular culture. This was a graduate thesis submitted to the University of South Florida’s School of Mass Communication.

²⁹ Goodhew, 22.

³⁰ Chesnek, 54. Christopher Chesnek’s position, a suggested threefold typology as boundaries for the academic study of religion is relevant to my research on sport and religion. This threefold typology encourages scholars of religious studies and social sciences to consider worldviews beyond the two-fold typology of naturalists, who take reductionist worldviews, and religionists, who take antireductionist worldviews. Chesnek believes this dichotomy is a disservice to what is going on in the field of religious studies and writes to explain its complexity. He supports a threefold typology, a concept introduced by his colleague Ann Taves, which acknowledges the cultural and ideological worldviews excluded by the dualistic formulation that actively shape theological approaches and debates

to be the dominant methodological approach. However, the research behind this paper is not exclusive to methods of sociology. In fact, the nexus of religion and sport is studied within a large and growing number of academic disciplines.³¹ As is demonstrated in this paper, a thorough examination and explanation of religious behaviors in social life, like sport, requires acquiring multiple perspectives from fields such as psychology and ethnography. Even in political science, literature reveals that governments and politicians have had to recognize and handle the force and fervor created by national or organized sport.³²³³ Topics and formations in popular culture can create worlds of meaning and value for participants in a similar form to the way religions address people's "ultimate concern."³⁴³⁵ This essay looks to apply these critical terms for religious studies to the investigation of sport as a cultural phenomenon and expression of civil or cultural religion.

in the study of religion. This threefold typology expands and informs the academic study of religion to include the dialogues between each side and seeks to provide constructive, middle grounds to move forward on.

³¹ Chris Brown, a current candidate for PhD at Emory University, is writing a dissertation called, "The Playing Fields of Eden: Envisioning the City through Soccer in the Brazilian Amazon, 1914-2014." His central question asks how the historical evolution of soccer interacted with and influenced public policies and cultural dynamics in Manaus, a city at the heart of the Brazilian Amazon that becomes a high-profile host city in the 2014 FIFA World Cup. This analysis focuses specifically on the history of urban playing fields, spectator venues, official and unofficial games, and social commentary in and around Manaus. His dissertation is an alternative, ethnographic approach to understanding the cultural topic of sport in society.

³² *The Two Escobars*.

³³ Huetteman, "Senate Report Says Pentagon Paid Sports Leagues for Patriotic Events."

³⁴ Hoffman, 19.

³⁵ Tillich, 5. Famous philosophical theologian and Christian, Paul Tillich argues that the state of being in "ultimate concern" is what constitutes the meaning of faith and broadly captures the condition of "religion." This assertion separates faith from other cultural processes.

WHAT IS RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE?

“Our labels of experiences do not merely describe them but help to constitute them. Religious language is formative of experiences as well as expressive of them. There still might be something different about the religious experience --- because it in part is constituted by religious concepts and ideas – that separates it from the often equally powerful experiences at the sporting event.”³⁶

While some argue it is not possible for cultural topics, like sport or entertainment, to create religious experience for participants, other scholars claim that religion can be understood in these spaces of popular culture. My arguments reflect this latter view, which asserts that religion can be understood within generic academic disciplines and departments, not just inside schools of theology.³⁷ I seek to demonstrate how professional sports and its events can constitute religiosity and possess religious dimensions. Given my opposition to *sui generis* religion, I am also of the belief that experiences are not inherently religious in nature and that through a cultural studies analysis, one finds that religious experiences are more culturally created and dependent than may be assumed.³⁸ Traditionally in the West, religiosity and religious experience are described in the context of “world religions.”³⁹ Therefore, sport and other cultural institutions are not extended the description of these terms and categories. Today however, institutional religion is no longer viewed as the exclusive cause of religiosity or religious experience and

³⁶ Bain-Selbo, 84.

³⁷ Gill, 92.

³⁸ Sharf, 98.

³⁹ Sharf 102-103. Sharf describes how the universal study of ‘world religions’ is another move on the part of Western cultural imperialists, made possible “by the West’s political technological, and military dominance.” Also see Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, in which she deconstructs the origin and genealogy of the category “world religions,” laying the foundation for the arguments and debates Sharf and several other academics engage in around the contentious nature of this topic and the uncertain identities cast by the category. This invention and expansion of “world religions” by Western ecclesiastics is similar to the reification process or inversion of “religion” and its expansion by colonialists.

topics in popular culture, such as sporting events, help explain how this understanding and cultural pattern came to be.⁴⁰⁴¹

In the essay “Experience,” Robert H. Sharf argues that in religious studies and broader academia an experience should not be attributed an essential, determinate nature or be described as inherently religious. To support this he turns to the intellectual genealogy behind the category “religious experience.” Sharf finds it to be a “relatively late and distinctively Western invention” that “provided new grounds upon which to defend religion against secular and scientific critique.”⁴² Sharf looks at premodern phenomena to show how and why the “recent and ideologically laden notion of religious experience” imposes improper and ecclesiastical notions on an experience or religion.⁴³ He demonstrates how this is true in the study of experience as a critical term in Asian religious traditions, which despite having played central roles since time immemorial, were overlooked by modern Westerners who took a new angle to the category of “religious experience” with a presumptuously ecclesiastical emphasis.⁴⁴ This example shows how Christian theological use of the phrase, “religious experience,” imposed foreign meaning and notions on historical and native cultures around the globe.⁴⁵ The West’s emphasis on experience tended to assume essential, determinate qualities that could be understood in the systematic and comparative study of world religions.⁴⁶ Sharf rejects the use of these tenuous terms and argues that a single experience cannot hold inherent value or determinate nature.

⁴⁰ Pew Research Survey

⁴¹ Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II*. Chapter 10: “Civil Religion: Two Cheers for America.”

⁴² Sharf, 98.

⁴³ Sharf, 99.

⁴⁴ Sharf, 102.

⁴⁵ This also shows that any experience is differentiable only in description, which is both formed and expressed through language and culture.

⁴⁶ Sharf, 113.

The importance of Sharf's argument is that experiences labeled today as "religious," "mystical," or "spiritual" can be understood to exist outside of fundamental obligation to the Church or a world religion. Remember that Bellah's conception of civil religion strongly relies on principles that transcend fundamental religious obligation but that nonetheless function analogously to religion in civil society. Naturally, as more scholars question and challenge institutional, ecclesiastical notions of religion and religious experience, people seek and suggest new activities and formations that constitute religiosity and fulfill the religious bandwidth of society.⁴⁷ In America the sport space has been described by social scientists as an alternative and powerful vehicle for establishing collective and affective relationships through historical organization, mythmaking, and tradition.⁴⁸ This has called to question the extension of so-called religious dimensions outside of religion and into sport.

In Eric Bain-Selbo's book *Game Day and God: Football, Faith, and Politics in the American South*, the historical and theoretical development of the category "religious experiences" is the focus of chapter four, "Ecstasy, Joy, and Sorrow: The Experience of Southern College Football." Here, Bain-Selbo discusses several intellectual icons that were committed to categorizing and understanding the subjective experiences of religious phenomena in the study of religion.⁴⁹ William James, the early twentieth-century philosopher and psychologist, is one of these scholars.⁵⁰ In his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, a seminal work in the typology of religious experience, he describes religion as "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they

⁴⁷ Oppenheimer, "When Some Turn to Church, Others Go to CrossFit."

⁴⁸ Markovits, Hellermen, 20.

⁴⁹ The result of these efforts to characterize religion and religious experience, although seemingly scholarly and objective, was the protection and empowerment of subjects/data in religious studies. This outcome is also described as a privileging more for religionists.

⁵⁰ Bain-Selbo, 76.

may consider the divine.”⁵¹ The twentieth-century historian of religion Mircea Eliade also explains religion in terms of subjective experience and not in terms of doctrines or institutions. In works like *The Sacred & the Profane: the Nature of Religion*, Eliade lays out a theory and phenomenology of religion, in which he connects qualitatively greater experiences with the sacred as opposed to what is associated with the profane.⁵² In other words, religious experiences occur with the sacred and not with the profane. These scholars and works are crucial points of understanding in the history of religious studies scholarship, giving insight to historical perspectives that inform and shape modern positions. The advancement of these ideas has provided fruitful grounds for scholars to recognize and write how sport and the religious can mix in experience and in society.

In our day, Robert Sharf is among a growing group of scholars, from psychologists and anthropologists to philosophers and theorists, who remain wary of definitions and characterizations of the term “religious experience.” Critics of James and Eliade argue that defining and distinguishing an experience as a “religious experience” relies on subjective characteristics and descriptions of the subject’s experience.⁵³ Therefore, when nineteenth century theologians and scholars of religion “started to identify feeling or emotion as that which was most characteristic of religion” academics began to call this a privileging move for religionists. To assign an essence to a religion or religious experience means that the claims and counters, which emerge from religious leaders and practitioners, are less susceptible to outside critique or social scientific analysis. American scholar of religion, Wayne Proudfoot, claims the nineteenth century turn to identification occurred for two reasons: “First, it was thought that feelings or emotions are more grounded in the lived experience of adherents than is doctrine... Second, the

⁵¹ James, 42.

⁵² Eliade and Trask, 8.

⁵³ Bain-Selbo, 74.

move to feeling or emotion helped to avoid a rationalistic critique of religion.”⁵⁴ In response to the apparent and predicted demise of religion, at least in doctrine, Christian theologians popularized their theory and rhetoric of “religious experience” knowing that feelings or emotions are more impermeable to rationalistic critique. As Bain-Selbo puts it, “A person’s beliefs may be susceptible to being proven wrong, but we cannot say a person’s feelings or emotions are wrong, at least not in the same sense.”⁵⁵

Indeed, in the aftermath of the Enlightenment, “religious doctrine had been subject to powerful philosophical criticism” and was seen as flawed and/or superstitious as individuals and whole societies modernized and reflected with rationality.⁵⁶ This privatization of religious experience implies that religion, in the global context, is “somehow separate from the tug and pull or socioeconomic life in general, and the global hegemony of capitalism in general.”⁵⁷ Therefore, interpreting and defining religious experience from this protective view of religion advances discourse only so far. If genuine and significant contributions are to come from the academic study of religion these limiting prisms and terms for understanding religion and religious experience must be dropped or reconsidered. This will allow for a needed integrated study of religion and culture and open investigation to the realm of religious life and experience in sport.

⁵⁴ Proudfoot, 75-78.

⁵⁵ Bain-Selbo, 75.

⁵⁶ Bain-Selbo, 75.

⁵⁷ McCutcheon, 97.

CAN RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE OCCUR IN SPORT?

“First, we could say that the experiences of the religious and sports fanatics very much could be the same but differ only in the explanations or interpretations. Or, second, because the pre-existing explanations or interpretations for potential experiences are different (between religious ones and sports), then the actual experiences come to be qualitatively different. In other words, if we interpret and understand an experience by looking through a theological or religious prism then – surprise! – we probably will not only think the experience is religious but experience it that way.”⁵⁸

In order to explain the phenomenology of religious experiences in the context of college football in the American South, Bain-Selbo shows the conditions and factors responsible for constituting an experience are also responsible for the designation or description of that experience (i.e. religious, spiritual, holy, profane). To do this, he must demonstrate that determining how experiences are experienced and how experiences are expressed is only possible through contextual analysis of the experience. Bain-Selbo draws on an exchange between Wayne Proudfoot and Stanley Schachter’s psychological research on experience to make his case.

Schachter’s experiments confirm that physiological changes alone are not clear indicators of particular emotions or feelings. In other words, the same physiological changes may be interpreted in different ways depending on the person who is experiencing them and the context in which they occur. What is the relevance of Schachter’s work for Proudfoot’s interest in religious experience and for our own concerns here? “Given the results of Schachter’s experiments,” Proudfoot concludes, “it seems quite plausible that at least some religious experiences are due to physiological changes for which the subject adopts a religious explanation. Thus, if understood in the same way that we should understand other emotions or feelings, the physiological changes (the felt experience) of the religious experience are, in fact, religious to the extent that they are interpreted religiously.”⁵⁹

Next, to grow his argument for how to interpret and explain religious experiences, Bain-Selbo cites the work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a Hungarian psychologist who championed the

⁵⁸ Bain-Selbo, 82.

⁵⁹ Bain-Selbo, 80.

psychological concept of “flow.”⁶⁰ In his groundbreaking work, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Csikszentmihalyi defines flow as “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it.”⁶¹ This mental state can occur in any number of environments, from religious spaces to office spaces. In sporting events, flow is ever present as “players and spectators cease to act in terms of common sense, and concentrate instead on the peculiar reality of the game.”⁶² Csikszentmihalyi writes that the construction of sporting events, religious settings, and other activities, and therefore the experiences they facilitate, “help participants and spectators achieve an ordered state of mind that is highly enjoyable.”⁶³ A consequence of this analysis is that This example serves not to equate flow and religious experience, but rather to show how similar descriptions of experiences and mental states that arise in different contexts justify investigating the extent of a so-called “religious experience” in sport and popular culture.

Of course, the differing contexts in which flow is experienced shape and produce different narratives and labels for the experiences and activities in question. For those who believe that the cognitive aspect of religious experiences cannot be found in other experiences, consider the rationale of Emile Durkheim, father of sociology and principal architect of modern social science. In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, he argues that God is nothing more than a reflection of society and thus, a symbol for society itself – what Bain-Selbo

⁶⁰ Bain-Selbo, 83.

⁶¹ Csikszentmihalyi, 4.

⁶² Csikszentmihalyi, 72. Durkheim might describe the peculiar reality of games and sports as a form of the sacred, as socially demarcated by the temporary suspension of profane behaviors, interests, and mental states. Perhaps the parallels of these social and psychological analyses strengthen the case for accepting religious dimensions and realities in sport.

⁶³ Csikszentmihalyi, 72.

paraphrases as “society’s projection of itself into the heavens.”⁶⁴ Using Durkheim’s model for religious life Bain-Selbo is able to postulate, “if the religious adherent worships God and the sports spectator worships society, and society is God, then their experiences may be very similar if not identical.”⁶⁵ This contextual comparison hopefully reveals how challenging it is to define or impose limits on the category of “religious experience.” Debates about religious phenomena in sport partially result from evolutions in human understanding and natural differences in discursive contexts. Some disputes however, arise from the unequal protection and privilege extended to religion in the West. In considering the argument here, it is imperative that those forms of historical and cultural bias in language are avoided.

The modern growth of sport, as measured by rising fan nations/social formations,⁶⁶ sport media revenue, event viewership, league value, teams’ salary caps, and more, should signal to academics that now is the time to better understand and describe the powerful religious allure of sport.⁶⁷ Author Howard Slusher argues that sport and religion both “open man towards the acceptance and actualization of being.”⁶⁸ Henry Edwards, a sociologist and sports psychologist, reminds us “that while the religious experience, be it in a church or stadium, happens to individuals, it nevertheless takes place in a communal context.”⁶⁹ In his book, *Sociology of Sport*, Edwards explains that sport provides humans with a sense of belonging and a chance to create and express powerful emotions.⁷⁰ Emotions that Slusher would describe as, “something of faith,

⁶⁴ Bain-Selbo, 85.

⁶⁵ Bain-Selbo, 85.

⁶⁶ Examples of these teams/groups include, Roll Tide (University of Alabama fans), Pats Nation (New England Patriots fans), America’s Team (Dallas Cowboys). Social media has rapidly accelerated membership in and exposure to these social formations. Searching “#PatsNation” on Twitter will suddenly connect you with endless messages reflecting support, solidarity, and emotional investment in the Patriot’s organization from fans around the world.

⁶⁷ Slusher, “Sport: A Philosophical Perspective,” 130.

⁶⁸ Slusher, “Sport and the Religious,” 191.

⁶⁹ Bain-Selbo, 84.

⁷⁰ Edwards, 242.

something of peace, a touch of power, a feeling of right, a sense of the precarious – all of these and more is what the *real spirit* of sport is.”⁷¹ In *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, anthropologist Victor Turner expands on these scholars’ works by describing the experience of belonging to a community. Turner labels the sense of belonging a person experiences in face-to-face encounters with others in a community as *communitas*. For Turner, *communitas* represents a sacred or holy experience.⁷²

These multiple perspectives on what shapes and constitutes an experience for someone in the context of his/her community, language, and background show how problematic it is to narrowly conceive and define what comprises a religious experience. So, if the experience of *communitas*, “flow,” or even God share similar content but are labeled differently, “then it should not surprise us when people decide that it is appropriate and perhaps necessary to use religious language to more accurately describe the experiences of the sporting event.”⁷³ When Eric Bain-Selbo surveyed college football fans in the South during the 2005 and 2006 seasons he received many genuine claims by observers and fans “that game days at universities throughout the South are occasions for religious experiences.”⁷⁴ Given the deeply religious nature and context of the American South “it is reasonable to imagine that many Southerners would be hesitant to use any potentially religious expressions to describe the game-day experience.”⁷⁵ However when considered in light of these arguments and the following excerpts from Alabama fans, to reject the possibility of experiencing religion in sport seems dishonest and illogical.

⁷¹ Slusher, “Sport and the Religious,” 191.

⁷² Turner V., 128.

⁷³ Bain-Selbo, 84.

⁷⁴ Bain-Selbo, 85.

⁷⁵ Bain-Selbo, 74. There is also good reason to think that Southerners would be more likely “to use any potentially religious expressions to describe the game-day experience” because religious language is already part of their lexicon. I believe this alternative reasoning is a wise and thoughtful cultural analysis that strengthens the case for sport’s religious function in human culture. It supports the diversity and plurality of religious life and reflects religion’s social conditionings and underpinnings.

Fan #1: “I guess it’s similar to church – sometimes you don’t really choose who to be for – you just are. For me, there was no moment of conversion. I was born into an Alabama family, and for that I’m thankful to this day.”⁷⁶

Fan #2: “Put simply, Alabama football has not, is not, and never will be just a game. It’s much, much more. It’s a way of life. You are born with it, you die with it, and your happiness during those moments in between greatly depends on it.”⁷⁷

AMERICAN SPORT SANCTIFIED: THE SUPER BOWL, MEDIA, AND BRAND

The popularity of college football in the American South or, more generally, of sport in America, reflects complex, unique, and ongoing relationships between American citizens, American history, and the culturally driven institutions of media and sport. In recent decades, this arena of American culture has expanded and has drawn interest from many scholars. In their book, *Offside: Soccer and American Exceptionalism*, Andrea Markovits and Steven Hellermen describe how and why soccer is not as popular in America as it is in the rest of the world. They find that America’s sports exceptionalism is “linked to a certain kind of self-contained nationalism acting apart from the rest of the international arena.”⁷⁸ Their recognition of incongruent popularity amongst different sports in the same country or context leads them to develop the concept of a nation’s “sport space.”⁷⁹ Their historical analysis finds that “once a nation’s ‘sport space’ is filled, there are very few changes in this space.”⁸⁰ They show that football has recently triumphed over baseball thanks to the effects of television and technology

⁷⁶ Al Davis Blanton, “A Prayer for the Tide,” in *Tales of the Tide*, 121.

⁷⁷ Turner K., 81.

⁷⁸ Markovits, Hellerman, 39-49. They maintain that America’s sports exceptionalism “remains inextricably linked to the other exceptionalism that have rendered American politics, American social relations, and American culture so similar yet at the same time so different from other comparable phenomena, particularly in Europe.” From this point of view, sport and religion share national context and cause. In consideration of this social theory and Bellah’s concept of civil religion, the bridge between religion and culture seems to get shorter and shorter.

⁷⁹ Markovits, Hellerman, 16.

⁸⁰ Markovits, Hellerman, 14-15. Similar to a religious landscape, their concept of sport space “describes a finite entity of entrants, a limited capacity to give all participants equal prominence and presence. Thus, the concept of ‘sport space’ is indeed physically determined and quantitatively defined, since the capacities of all such spaces are limited.”

on the reorganization of the American sports space.⁸¹ As can be seen by continued increases in sport viewership and participation, most notably in the Super Bowl but also in American colleges and universities, the American sport space is an ongoing social formation that has strengthened and accelerated in the last half-century.⁸² To Markovits and Hellerman the ability of a sport space to change represents its most important ingredient, which is that it “denotes a qualitative dimension of cultural construction and group contestation that reflects power relationships in society at large, and in sport in particular.”⁸³

While Americans have become more enthralled with sport, their affiliation with religion has decreased. Recent reports from the Pew Research Center have highlighted stability and instability in the U.S. religious landscape. Although the percentage of Americans “who say they believe in God, pray daily and regularly go to church or other religious services all have declined modestly in recent years,” the majority of religiously affiliated Americans, that is, those who do claim a religion, are “even more devout than they were a few years ago.”⁸⁴ These trends of Americans’ religious life represent a continual flux in American culture that is also vibrant within the American sport space. Not only do incongruities exist among America’s religiously devout but also among members of the same houses of worship. To this extent, both sport life and religious life capture and reflect ongoing, interactive social processes between their

⁸¹ Markovits, Hellerman, 136 – 137.

⁸² Leibovich, “Roger Goodell’s Unstoppable Football Machine.” The subtitle of this article reads, “For all the revelations about its brutality, pro football is more popular and profitable than ever. How the N.F.L. commissioner and a group of billionaire owners have kept the league on offense.” Ironically, the impressive gains of football in the American sport space are also explained through a cultural analysis of football and sport’s violent content. This argument will be fleshed out in the final discussions of this paper.

⁸³ Markovits, Hellerman, 15.

⁸⁴ Pew Research Center, “U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious.” The argument here is not that religion has recently declined in America because of the recent rise of sport in the country. This is not a causal claim I pursue in this paper. I merely mean to suggest that the fluctuations in both cultural sectors can be understood in the similar context of social formations and religious beliefs, behaviors, and institutions.

participants and external settings.⁸⁵ The narratives presented in this paper suggest that these contextual similarities between sport and religion are not coincidental but in fact highlight how similar religion and sport are in their sociological and phenomenological functions.

For the last five decades in America, the NFL's Super Bowl has gained popularity, press, and power that function akin to national celebrations or holidays. Super Bowl Sunday is an event in which the elements of religious festival, sacredness in sport, and religious experience are argued to exist. Can the Super Bowl be designated as a religious festival? Is the "Big Game" an example of sport sanctified or mythicized?⁸⁶ One thing is certain; the Super Bowl represents and produces cultural myths, performances, and experiences that work to transform the contingent into the universal for Americans.⁸⁷ Joseph Price compares the Super Bowl to "festivals in ancient societies, which made no distinctions regarding the religious, political and sporting character of certain events."⁸⁸ The Super Bowl succeeds in transcending and reuniting these now disparate dimensions of social life.⁸⁹ Since the first Super Bowl in 1967, a year that marks the beginning of the "Super Bowl era" and "modern NFL history," these annual championship games have served to reinforce a nationalistic and militaristic culture, and a patriotic sense of belonging for Americans.⁹⁰ This Super Bowl study explains how the theatrical event of the Super Bowl influences American society in religious and socially binding ways.

⁸⁵ Markovits, Helleman, 140.

⁸⁶ Linshi, "Here's Why Companies Can't Say 'Super Bowl' in Their Super Bowl Ads." Because the NFL has trademarked the term "Super Bowl," brands must use alternative labels if they want to market and advertise for or during the game. The very protection of the game's name indicates a unique aspect that supports the narrative of sacred dimensions in sport and mythmaking in the Super Bowl.

⁸⁷ McCutcheon, 32-33. McCutcheon describes this transformation as mythmaking activity, which he believes "is the business of making 'particular and contingent world-views appear to be ubiquitous and absolute' (Arnal 1997: 317)." He argues that social formations are the ongoing result of mythmaking and "social formation, then, is the art of manufacturing and reproducing totalized systems of re-presentation."

⁸⁸ Price, "The Super Bowl as Religious Festival."

⁸⁹ Harvey, 5.

⁹⁰ Fischer, 42.

Joseph Price, a religious studies professor with a doctorate in theology and culture, argues in his article, “The Super Bowl as Religious Festival,” that theories and practices central to religious studies, like mythmaking, sacrifice, and interpretation, are significant and prevalent in the American sporting event of the Super Bowl. His essay supports and encourages investigations to be made in this field by academics of religious studies, sociology, and political science. Price argues for a more holistic and methodical interdisciplinary analysis of sporting events and culture that support seeing the Super Bowl and sporting events as venues for religious festivities and experiences.

Price does not commit to definitions of the term “religion” but rather reveals the meaning he assigns to the term and to “religious festival” through his analysis of the Super Bowl as an element of American civil religion. His study finds that two mythic features of the Super Bowl support its role as a religious festival: the ritual actions in the game itself and the half-time show. The strength of Price’s argument lies in the central role of mythmaking in the development and evolution of any religious group.⁹¹ While rhetorical mythmaking and oral history is a central theme among religious groups, physically embodied mythmaking or rituals are paramount in cultural analysis of religiosity and religious life. Price argues that the cultural myths created and perpetuated by the Super Bowl allow it to function “as a major religious festival for American culture, for the event signals a convergence of sports, politics and myth.”⁹² Like this paper, the analysis offered in Price’s article supports a social theory of religion, which first shows that the location of a religious festival can exist outside the walls of institutional religion, and second demonstrates how the theatrical event of the Super Bowl serves a religious function in American culture and civil society.

⁹¹ Price, “An American Apotheosis: Sports as Popular Religion,” 212.

⁹² Price, “The Super Bowl as Religious Festival.”

In his article, “Fox Sports, Super Bowl XLII, and the Affirmation of American Civil Religion,” Michael Butterworth builds on the principles of civil religion used by Bellah and Price. Butterworth presents examples of how sports and its coverage reflect nationalistic symbolism and creates meaning for American viewers. Much of this meaning, he explains, is created by the connection between values of American democracy and the patriotic event of the Super Bowl. His analysis centers on the “masculinist moral capital” and ritual invocations of the Declaration that are annually present at the big game.⁹³ Whether the influence comes from television coverage that centers on national identity, peoplehood, history, and values or from the pre-game, mid-game, and post-game rituals carried out on the field and around it, Butterworth affirms the vitality of American civil religion in the arena of the Super Bowl.⁹⁴ He continually builds on Bellah’s scholarship on civil religion to show how the tradition of the Super Bowl produces “rhetorical gestures that ensure identification and community” for Americans.⁹⁵ It seems that the degree to which the Super Bowl is sacred or sanctified depends on the extent to which individuals engage with the mythmaking of the game.

This study of the Super Bowl shows how America’s “Big Game” offers viewers an experience rich with mythical and ritual elements that can produce religious meaning and confirmation for Americans’ cultural religiosity and national identity. It also explains the Super Bowl as a minor element of American civil religion. The Super Bowl includes specific rituals, principles, myths, and experiences that can excite a viewer’s religiosity. This analysis does not advance that claim because the Super Bowl plays the role of a religious festival in America, other sporting events and organizations achieve a similar impact. On the other hand, the foundation has been set here to show how religiosity and religious meaning are created,

⁹³ Butterworth, 319.

⁹⁴ Butterworth, 320.

⁹⁵ Butterworth, 322.

identified, and experienced in the cultural setting of American football, where there is a belief system that results in violent, ritualistic, and ceremonial behavior.⁹⁶

The analysis of the Super Bowl as a religious festival in America has a historic context that serves to explain the game's appeal and significance. In recent years there are powerful examples and trends in American news and media that serve to reinforce and accelerate the consumerist culture and appeal of the Super Bowl. Today there is unparalleled access to technology and an unlimited scope of influence for media that is only gaining momentum.⁹⁷ This momentum of media in America can be explained through two narratives: the rise of TV viewership/media spending and the appealing religious content of media broadcasts. To be sure, these two explanations are part of complex, shared social processes and therefore are difficult to isolate from each another or other causes and conditions. This investigation considers the significant statistical momentum supporting sports media and then considers and describes how the media broadcasts of sporting events are religious.

The record-breaking 114 million television viewers during Super Bowl XLIX in 2015 is only one of many statistical indicators that reflect the growing popularity and attraction of football in America. Not only do TV programs like Thursday Night Football, Sunday Night Football, and Monday Night Football draw top TV ratings week after week, but their coverage and viewership is only projected to increase.⁹⁸ As more viewers tune in to watch these events more channels and companies are likely to invest in the industry. In recent years, the Super Bowl has set the high-water mark for most viewership and most expensive advertisement in television history. These two couple trends are expressed in the two graphs below.

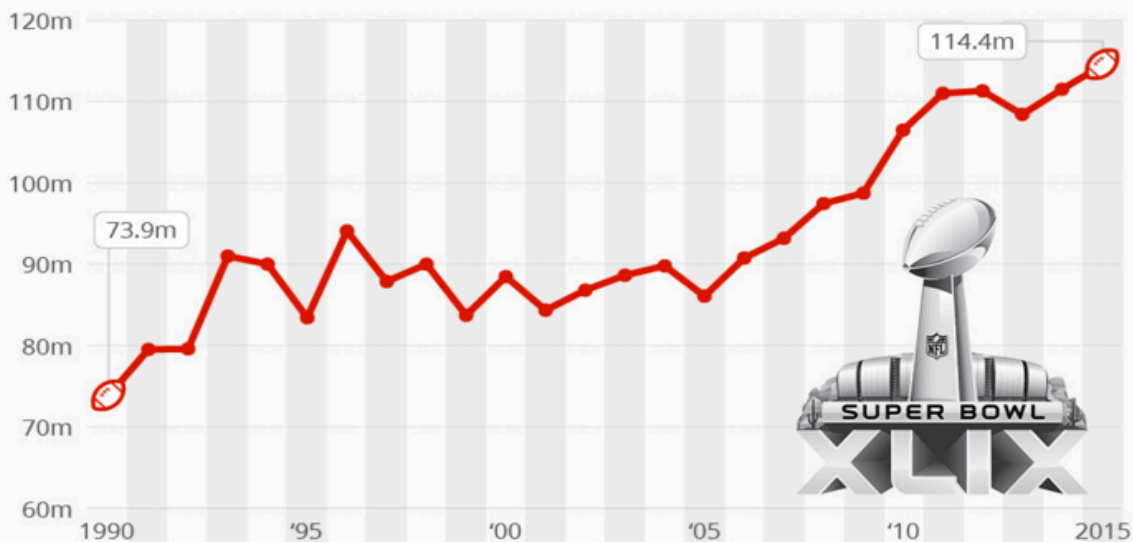
⁹⁶ J.Z. Smith, 270.

⁹⁷ Deitsch, "Why there is no ceiling in near future for NFL ratings, more Media Circus." It should be noted that this trend is not unique to sports media. The data is but the political media also has recently proliferated and acquired growth and competition in TV airtime.

⁹⁸ TV by the Numbers and Sports Media Watch.

Super Bowl XLIX Draws Record TV Crowd

Average TV audience during Super Bowl broadcasts in the United States from 1990 to 2015



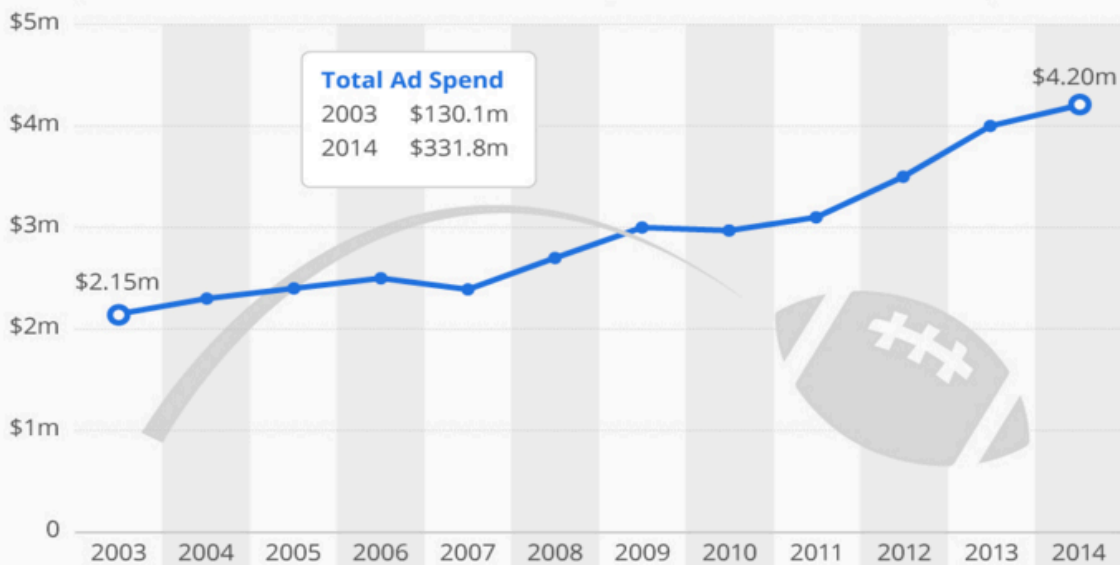
Source: Nielsen



99

Super Bowl Ad Prices Doubled Since 2003

Average rate for a 30-second advertisement during the U.S. TV broadcast of the Super Bowl



Total Ad Spend	
2003	\$130.1m
2014	\$331.8m

Source: Kantar Media



100

⁹⁹ Richter, "Super Bowl XLIX Draws Record TV Crowd."

¹⁰⁰ Richter, "Super Bowl Ad Prices Doubled Since 2003."

The unwavering growth of the Super Bowl market is only the tip of the iceberg for understanding how sporting events and leagues have become so big and important in American popular culture. As the game has evolved and grown in America, especially in the last fifty years, so has the consumer market for the game. In America around \$11 billion are annually spent by sport spectators to attend sporting events.¹⁰¹ Despite this massive market for attendance sporting events, in the study, “Spectator Motives: Why Do We Watch When Our Favorite Team Is Not Playing?” Janet S. Fink and Heidi M. Parker explain that, “given the proliferation of sports broadcasting in recent years, spectatorship is no longer limited to only those who attend games.”¹⁰² Markovits and Hellerman argue that in America this proliferation of sport broadcasting has favored the NFL and football’s popularity over other leagues and sports.¹⁰³ They note that, “as broadcasting technology progressed, professional football proved almost perfect for television in both its presentation and scheduling.”¹⁰⁴ These observations are reinforced by current Neilson TV ratings, which show the NFL offers America’s favorite television programming year in and year out.¹⁰⁵

The rise and development of football in the American sport space has many factors that explain the game’s increased attraction, from youth teams to professional teams. One crucial factor that has been intertwined and therefore responsible for football’s growth is media contracts. Before the National Football League (NFL) and the American Football League (AFL) merged in 1966, broadcasting channels like NBC and CBS competed for television coverage.¹⁰⁶ In 1962, CBS signed exclusive

¹⁰¹ Howard & DeSchrive, 2005.

¹⁰² Fink & Parker, 210.

¹⁰³ Markovits, Hellerman, 136.

¹⁰⁴ Markovits, Hellerman, 140.

¹⁰⁵ TV by the Numbers and Sports Media Watch.

¹⁰⁶ Markovits, Hellerman, 140. Broadcasting channels still fiercely compete for coverage of sporting events. Markovits and Hellerman’s explain the history, purpose, and strategy of the AFL. The narrative they present seems analogous to religious groups looking to fill a religious landscape with missionaries or to militant groups in the Middle East competing for territory within political institutional vacuums. “The AFL’s strategy was to occupy niches in the country left uncovered by the NFL... Just as the NFL gained in popularity vis-à-vis the college game for its greater emphasis on the passing game, the AFL attracted fans to its brand of football by presenting a more

contracts with the NFL to broadcast the entire league's game for the next two seasons and in 1965 NBC signed a national contract for exclusive coverage of AFL games.¹⁰⁷ Other than providing viewers, what impact did these contracts have on these professional leagues? In their chapter, "American Sport Space Rearranged," Hellerman and Markovits point out that this AFL-NBC contract "provided the New York Jets the necessary funds to outbid the NFL for the services of University of Alabama quarterback Joe Namath, signed to a four-year guaranteed contract of \$427,000... an unprecedented sum of money in professional sports, let alone football."¹⁰⁸

Although the AFL and NFL merged soon after Namath's unprecedented deal, the type of bidding and branding demonstrated in the 1960s by leagues and networks only magnified later in the century. At the end of the 1990s, CBS created "an eight-year network television package with the NFL that amounted to \$17.6 billion and included FOX, the Disney-owned ABC (as the continued guardian of Monday Night Football) and ESPN, in addition to CBS."¹⁰⁹ To this day this deal remains "far and away the largest amount of cash paid by any television consortium for the rights to televise any sport event, including the Olympics and the World Cup in soccer."¹¹⁰ According to Hellerman and Markovits, "at the end of the twentieth century, the position of professional football at the apex in the American sport space was unchallenged, despite fluctuations in the NFL's television ratings in the late 1990s."¹¹¹ Clearly, understanding the growth of football and the constant reorganization of the American sport space requires attention to the powerful role media plays in mediating sport leagues, teams, players, and fans.

offensive-minded contest than that played in the NFL." Indeed, the force of brand and strategic growth in sport can be understood in analogous contexts.

¹⁰⁷ Markovits, Hellerman, 140.

¹⁰⁸ Hellerman and Markovits, 141. Soon, Namath began to receive the "kind of idolization previously reserved for movie and rock stars," and "undoubtedly became professional football's most successful crossover star up to that point and, arguably, ever since." Players like Tom Brady, Dan Marino, Bo Jackson, John Elway, and others have arguably occupied this role since.

¹⁰⁹ Markovits, Hellerman, 143-144.

¹¹⁰ Markovits, Hellerman, 144.

¹¹¹ Markovits, Hellerman, 145.

The historical review of the American sport space and the influence media has had on its rearrangement shows what is happening in one sphere of American popular culture, sport, is shaped and controlled by other parts of culture such as media, economy, and politics. This means that understanding why sport and football specifically, dominate the American sport space and the American media, requires close analysis of the media's content, portrayal, and cultural context. A couple questions guide this investigation: First, why is football "almost perfect for television in both its presentation and scheduling?" Second, what about the sports media makes it larger and more popular than political media or other networks in America? Finally, given these questions and evidence, is there a religious reason supporting the history and trends laid out in the American sport space, specifically in regard to football?

Today, both in America and the world, sport teams, leagues, and players have created for themselves a premium brand that requires constant change and attention-to-detail. On December 6, 2015, the NFL Sunday pre-game coverage broadcasted live from Pearl Harbor, Hawaii as part of "Fox Salutes the Military" to honor American soldiers, veterans, and to commemorate the Pearl Harbor attacks of December 7, 1941. The broadcast team, which included recent hall-of-fame veterans of the NFL like Michael Strahan, Terry Bradshaw, and Howie Long, was situated on the decks of Ford Pier with the USS Arizona Memorial and the USS Missouri in the backdrop. The Sunday pre-game show was only one feature of the "Fox Salutes the Military" week in Hawaii from December 4-7. Their tribute to America's military manifested in several more sporting events and broadcasts that upheld the honorable tone.

National symbols, messages, and sentiments are commonly displayed in the media's coverage of sporting events. For example, in 2013 the NFL unveiled a new design for its classic copyright logo, which is televised during any telecast of the NFL. The new copyright message "uses the familiar, tried

and true voice over and a dramatic new arrangement for the NFL's signature music, and a flyover of the U.S. showing lights coming on across the country – in the shape of the NFL logo."¹¹² Patriotism is featured across countless broadcasts of organized sports in America. More examples of these annual events include the NFL's Super Bowl, the March Madness college basketball tournament, and the MLB All-Star game. These national symbols and messages are also commonly used throughout professional sport seasons and day-to-day coverage of sport games and leagues. In order for a sport brand or religious institution to remain profitable, powerful, and relevant, it must rely partially on its branding efforts and partially on the basic needs and desires of consumers. If examined more closely, could this latter mechanism of support for religious life and sport life reveal their degree of connection?¹¹³



¹¹² Fickes, "Making Commercials: Lighting up the U.S." The image above is the NFL's logo, which stands for several seconds as the final frame of the NFL's copyright message televised broadcast.

¹¹³ Investigating this study further would help clarify whether the trends present in the Pew data are coincidentally or correlatively related to sport's rise.

SPORT AND RELIGION: VIOLENCE, RITUAL, AND SACRIFICE

Violence, or at least ritualized violence, has played a central role in the development and evolution of nearly every society.¹¹⁴ Over the centuries, the presence of festivals that retain ritualistic characteristics and include the sacrifice of a victim or surrogate-victim is evidence of the continuation of social life and cultural formations. So-called religions or religious formations are an example of these social formations. Their existence continues to suggest that religions or religious behaviors help to protect social life.¹¹⁵ That being said, because occurrences in religious life are caused and conditioned by surrounding social life and context, institutions designated as religious are not static and will therefore continue to change and produce a variety of ritual practices and religious functions and experiences. Father of sociology, Emile Durkheim, was a visionary of religion who recognized its social flux.

If today we have some difficulty imagining what the feasts and ceremonies of the future will be, it is because we are going through a period of transition and moral mediocrity. The great things of the past that excited our fathers no longer arouse the same zeal among us, either because they have passed so completely into common custom that we lose awareness of them or because they no longer suit our aspirations... A day will come when our societies once again will know hours of creative effervescence during which new ideals will again spring forth and new formulas emerge to guide humanity for a time.¹¹⁶

Despite the transforming faces of religion and religious life many argue that religion is still a necessary and unwavering force in society. One scholar who insists on this is René Girard. Girard, a prolific French historian, literary critic, and philosopher of social science, is most well known for his contributions to anthropological philosophy, specifically the concepts of “mimetic desire” and the surrogate-victim mechanism. In his book, *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard claims that, “there is no

¹¹⁴ Girard, 119.

¹¹⁵ Bain-Selbo, 56.

¹¹⁶ Durkheim, 429.

society without religion because without religion society cannot exist.”¹¹⁷ This claim relies on his hypothesis that animal and human biology is mechanized to “mimetic desire,” which naturally leads to violence and thus, sacrifice.¹¹⁸ Therefore, Girard continues, humanity created religion in order to prevent “reciprocal violence.”¹¹⁹ Eric Bain-Selbo summarizes this social development; “instead of providing an unending cycle of real victims of violence, societies developed sacrificial rituals in which surrogate victims suffer the violence of the community.”¹²⁰ An important implication of René Girard’s theory in the study of religion is that violence and the sacred are “inseparable” domains and experiences.¹²¹ Girard writes, “the operations of violence and the sacred are ultimately the same process.”¹²² The process is sacrifice and the sacred is embodied through ritualized violence. This discussion on violence, ritual, and religion should hopefully bring to mind significant and insightful connections involving sport, society, and religion.

For Girard, the union of violence with the sacred guides his theories on religion and sport. He believes that sport or play, like religion, is an expression of the sacred because it is another way in which societies avoid genuine violence through ritualized sacrifice. Durkheim also affirms the religious and sacred nature of sport. Based on his social scientific observations and inquiries, he argues that sport originated in a religious context and continues to give rise to collective effervescence, a hallmark form of religious life according to his master work, *The Elementary Forms of Religious*

¹¹⁷ Girard, 4.

¹¹⁸ Girard, 221. The concept of mimetic desire describes that desire in the human condition is naturally predisposed to reflecting what we assume others to desire. In other words, we desire what we expect our peers to desire. This eventually leads to conflict because people end up wanting the same object.

¹¹⁹ Girard, 55. Girard’s theories of mimetic desire, surrogate victim/violence, and the creation of archaic religion are complex. In short, once mimetic tension and conflict reached a paroxysm of violence in a community, choosing and eliminating a victim would be the only way to restore peace. In order to prevent societies from reaching this stage of sacrifice, religion was created to defuse perpetual crisis and create the miracle of lasting peace through the power of scapegoat, violence, and the surrogate victim mechanism. Girard is criticized for interpreting Jesus Christ as the ultimate surrogate victim in religion. Critics of Girard dispute his claim that Jesus was “the first scapegoat to understand the need for his death and to forgive those who inflicted it” (Scruton, 20).

¹²⁰ Bain-Selbo, 56.

¹²¹ Girard, 19.

¹²² Girard, 258.

Life.¹²³ Like religion, the rules and processes of ritual and sacrifice are at play in sport where the surrogate-victim mechanism is important and operative. The findings of Girard's analysis are clear, "play has a religious origin, to be sure, insofar as it reproduces certain aspects of the sacrificial crisis."¹²⁴

The sacrificial crisis that Girard speaks of is carried out through the cultural process and ritual of the surrogate-victim mechanism. Girard observes that rituals are central to the development and preservation of society and that they are firmly rooted in religious settings. Given his views on the function of religion, it is not surprising that his theory of ritual claims, "the objective of ritual is the proper reenactment of the surrogate-victim mechanism; its function is to perpetuate or renew the effects of this mechanism; that is, to keep violence *outside* the community."¹²⁵ Finding examples of this mechanism's presence throughout history is not difficult and highlights more overlap between religion and sport.

After surveying human history, Girard finds that, "almost every society has festivals that have retained a ritualistic character of the centuries," and, "festivals also are the events in which the surrogate-victim mechanism is operative."¹²⁶ In social life, festivals mark the occasion when it is permitted to break social norms, which are typically affirmed by profane behaviors. In other words, the festival permits what is otherwise prohibited in society (i.e. excessive and public consumption of alcohol, sexual promiscuity, and violence, either literally or symbolically).¹²⁷ In the festival, Girard argues, the sacrificial ritual is capable of being "reiterated and reenacted in a thousand different forms, for it alone can prevent transcendental violence from turning back into reciprocal violence, the violence that really hurts, setting man against man and threatening the total destruction of the

¹²³ Durkheim, 385.

¹²⁴ Bain-Selbo, 54.

¹²⁵ Girard, 92.

¹²⁶ Girard, 119.

¹²⁷ Bain-Selbo, 59.

community.”¹²⁸ From ancient to modern times, the roles of sacrificial rituals are affirmed in the festival by the community. So when social norms are broken in festival “by permitting *only through ritual practice* what is otherwise prohibited, the norms of the society during everyday or profane times are affirmed for the members of the community.”¹²⁹ Durkheim also argues that the breaking of norms in the festival via ritual practice allows for religion to achieve its purpose, which is to create community and express the community’s values and norms.¹³⁰

Girard’s argument for the social-biological function of religion in social life has parallels to Durkheim’s analyses of the social-psychological function of religion. Both scholars’ theories help in interpreting how sport functions analogously to religion. From play to ritualized violence, sport includes a variety of patterns and behaviors that also are expressed in religious institutions and settings. The meanings and experiences created by sport (i.e. rituals, sacrifices, and symbols) have an origin and context explained by religious life and organization. Furthermore, the variety of settings in which sacrificial rituals are capable of reenacting and reinforcing the surrogate-victim mechanism suggests that sport, especially violent forms like football, fulfills some basic religious function in social life. These analyses bring forward insight and concern; as the secularization of modern commercial society continues in the West, does the rising popularity of sport, specifically football, indicate or signify a religious function?

In the fall of 2005 and 2006 Eric Bain-Selbo surveyed Southern college football fans to study how football fit into their personal and communal lives. In light of Girard and Durkheim’s analyses, the results of these surveys affirm religious dimensions in sport through insight into the role and ultimate meaning of sport in society. In his research, Bain-Selbo found that “a little more than 11 percent of respondents claimed college football as the place where they experienced the greatest sense

¹²⁸ Girard, 124-125.

¹²⁹ Bain-Selbo, 57.

¹³⁰ Durkheim, 384.

of community.”¹³¹ Furthermore, “out of a choice of seven options, college football ranked, on average, just behind family, friends, and just ahead of church.”¹³² Like the two testimonies from Alabama fans, Bain-Selbo’s data shows an irrefutable connection between people, their community, and sport. Taking Chesnek’s approach of religiosity into view, these accounts also suggest existential meaning in sport.

Bain-Selbo’s findings reinforce Durkheim’s analysis of the communal function of religion through his totemic principle, which stands both literally and figuratively for “that which comes to organize all people, animals, and things.”¹³³ The totem affirms social authority and communal moral consciousness because it is the most sacred thing for a tribe or clan.¹³⁴ Its sacredness and meaning organize “the relative importance of everything by virtue of any particular thing’s affinity or relatedness to the totem.”¹³⁵ In the case of college football, the team is the totem and represents all the fans and people from the university who are invested in that team. Although each team is its own totem, the collective grouping of totems via organized leagues and associations present a macro-totem for the collective consciousness of fans and participants. Were it not for the import of violence, ritual, and sacrifice to the sport scene, these teams/totems would not be nearly as popular in communal life. Given this, a close examination of sport in culture benefits from a religious studies approach because this discipline can most accurately describe the raw content and emotion that is experienced at a sporting event.

When strung together, the collective narratives of sport teams/totems reflect close and growing relationships between people and the content of modern sport. In *An Unholy Alliance: The Sacred and Modern Sports*, Robert Higgs and Michael Braswell analyze the close relationship between sport and

¹³¹ Bain-Selbo, 51.

¹³² Bain-Selbo, 51.

¹³³ Bain-Selbo, 29.

¹³⁴ Durkheim, 126.

¹³⁵ Bain-Selbo, 29.

American militarism. Historical evidence of this relationship can be found in the names of stadia throughout the country that are named in honor of American soldiers.¹³⁶ Today, this relationship has brought attention and controversy to the U.S. Congress. In 2015, Senator John McCain led an effort to end paid military tributes from taxpayer money at sport games. From 2012 to 2015 the Department of Defense spent up to \$6.8 million of taxpayer money to sponsor military and soldier tributes at different sporting events. Of the 122 professional sport contracts scrutinized in the congressional report, 72 of the teams' contracts "contained items deemed 'paid patriotism' – the payment of taxpayer Defense funds to teams in exchange for tributes like NFL's "Salute to Service."¹³⁷ While the majority of these funds were allocated to NFL teams, the NBA, NHL, MLB, and MLS received these funds too. To honor the great sacrifices of American soldiers through the medium of modern sport or ritualized violence suggests the ongoing relevance and accuracy of Girard's cultural analysis and supports Bellah's scholarship on analogous forms of religion in culture.

ANTICIPATING OBJECTIONS

Even though there may be a link between religion, the sacred, and violence, some reject Girard's analyses and argue that violence is only one facet of religion and that protecting society from our natural instinct to violence is certainly not religion's primary purpose. This is what Higgs and Braswell assert when they claim "there are only these two types of religion – (1) the religion of the sacred, with rituals built around stories of sacrifice and preparation for engagement in war or sports and (2) the religion of the holy, emphasizing prayer, meditation, cultivation of the land, caring for the sick, and observance of shepherd principles." Given these definitions, especially the first one, if we discount Girard's theories on violence and religion, the case for experiencing the sacred or religious in

¹³⁶ Higgs and Braswell, 139.

¹³⁷ Barron-Lopez, Waldron, "Pentagon Paid up to \$6.8 million of Taxpayer Money to Pro Sports Teams for Military Tributes."

the context of sport does not weaken. In order to understand how the sport venue can create the sacred, recall Eliade, Durkheim, and Turner's arguments for what factors are responsible for creating experiences that are characterized as religious. Narratives of stepping out of the profane to enter and experience the sacred, only to return again, all describe processes involving rituals, sacrifices, and communities. From the concept of flow to *communitas*, a diverse mix of scholars have effectively displayed the variance of contexts and conditions that create experiences that can be described as religious, holy, or sacred.

Multiple scholars also note that play and games originated in a religious context. Sport venues, therefore, appear to be a place of limitless communal and religious possibilities.¹³⁸ From rituals and sacrifices to superstitious and violent behaviors, sport relates to religion in countless ways. Howard Slusher asserts, "Sacrifice is of great import to the sport scene and let no one be naïve in believing it does not appeal to the 'religious in man.'" ¹³⁹ His paper focuses specifically on football, a sport that "dramatizes the sacrifice, discipline, and inner rage of collective behavior."¹⁴⁰ This sacrifice, discipline, and rage, Girard would argue, express what is fundamentally religious. Even without a surrogate loser or the violent, repeated blows to the head that occur in every play in football, sacrifice is still embodied in sport through the players themselves. Michael Novak writes, "Once an athlete accepts the uniform, he is in effect donning priestly vestments. It is the function of priests to offer sacrifices... Always the sacrifice is ritual: the athlete bears the burden of identification. He is no longer living his own life only."¹⁴¹ Whether the sacrifice in sport is symbolic via uniforms or is literal via career-threatening injuries or life-threatening conditions, the religious dimensions of sport locales are clear and consistent.

¹³⁸ Wann et al., *Sports Fans*, 182.

¹³⁹ Slusher, "Sport and the Religious," 184.

¹⁴⁰ Novak, 84.

¹⁴¹ Novak, 141.

Whether sport venues are alive for reasons of religious nature (i.e. rituals, myths, sacrifices), militaristic purposes, issues of identification, or another explanation is up for debate. Some scholars argue that sport is popular for a mix of these reasons. As can be seen in the case of the Super Bowl, America's military culture is an example of a social pillar that feeds into sport's religious dimensions. In Robert Bellah's conception of civil religion different activities and policies can support the ethical principles of a culture or society (i.e. history, military, economy, politics). Higgs and Braswell "conclude that the model for the American athlete has never been the shepherd, that is, the religious (nurturing, pacific, loving) model, but the knight, representing the military (conquering, violent, triumphant)."¹⁴² Indeed, Girard would reject this conception of "the religious" and argue that the knight is in fact the most religious character. On the other hand, Higgs and Braswell's image of the American model athlete might be misleading. While your typical American athletic icon, be it Jackie Robinson, Magic Johnson, or Tom Brady, does not leap to the top of popular culture for nurturing or loving acts on the field, each is incentivized to commit to and display shepherdly principles off the field in order to achieve fame and a popular image. For the most part, if a professional or collegiate athlete's "knightly" acts externalize off of the field, in either public or private, the reputation of themselves, their career, and their league/school are damaged.¹⁴³ Therefore, in so far as Higgs and Braswell are concerned, the singular model for the American athlete as a knight could be challenged by a dualistic approach, one that recognizes that athletes can fit both types of religious model, the

¹⁴²Bain-Selbo, 65.

¹⁴³ There are formal and informal consequences for athletes' violation of norms. The existence of code of conduct agreements for players of every association highlights another religious feature of sport. Similar to a dedicated monastic being obedient to vows, an athlete sacrifices certain privileges and behaviors by joining a league like the NCAA or the NFL. Athletes also rely on brands or sponsors for income. These franchises are put in jeopardy and suffer when the image of the athlete sponsor is tarnished.

knight and the shepherd. Regardless of the model chosen, there seems little to no justification for denying the religious re-presentations, behaviors, and myths in sport.

All descriptions and models aside, there are voices who dispute the legitimacy of analyses that claim overlap between the role and functions of sport and religion, and argue they are separate in culture. The theologian may object to the comparison or equation of sport and religion because of the basic contradiction between a belief-based tradition and a popular cultural tradition. The academic may argue that emphasizing their similarities is problematic because doing this narrows definitions and conceptions of what elements constitute sport, religion, and the experiences in between. Such objections can also claim that even though similarities exist, the differences between sport and religion are greater and more pronounced. However, even Higgs and Braswell, “who are not sympathetic to the comparison of sports to religion, argue that religion around the world has become a ‘blood sport.’”¹⁴⁴ Indeed, many of the similarities and/or differences between sport and religion may stem from social semantic interpretations.¹⁴⁵

In her essay, “Sport Is Not a Religion,” Joan M. Chandler argues against scholars and literature that entertain the consideration of sport as religion. Her argument is that sport does not fully address and answer the fundamental questions of religion, such as “Where did I come

¹⁴⁴ Higgs and Braswell, 27. Mark Juergensmeyer affirms this current and continued expression of religions in his book *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*.

¹⁴⁵ In this essay I side with several arguments made by certain scholars while I oppose the theories and terms of others. Those who argue that religion, religiosity, and religious dimensions cannot exist beyond “world religions” offer well-reasoned claims. Their arguments impose limits on how far religiosity and the descriptive use “religious” extend in culture. This position supports ideas of modernism that assume religions have essences and leverages a more reified, systematic conception of religion. There are also non-essentialist positions, between religionists and naturalists, which do not support *sui generis* religion but do enforce some limits on the application of these descriptions. Clearly, much of the debate is over how “religion” and its forms are or ought to be compartmentalized and demarcated from other cultural topics in society. If academics are to ever agree, or at least meaningfully negotiate the meaning of religion, the veil of *sui generis* religion must be lifted. This would effectively challenge scholars who see “world religions” as the limit for religiosity. As McCutcheon argues on page ninety-nine, “globalized religion, then, turns out to be yet another transnational commodity... an economics effectively obscured by the totalizing and inductivist discourse on *sui generis* religion.” This reveals yet another argument connecting religion and sport – this time through capitalist economics and branding.

from?” and “Where am I going to?”¹⁴⁶ She claims the function of religion is to explain the ultimate and unique cycle of life and death, and that sport and other cultural activities can provide only limited insight and meaning to devoted audiences and trained participants.¹⁴⁷ She compares the monotheistic, institutionalized, text-based Christian religion with the polytheistic, individualized, oral-based Navajo religion to show that even these radically different traditions each fulfill “a religion’s unique function.”¹⁴⁸ Sport, in her opinion, does not.

Chandler’s arguments are distinctly different from mine in the assumptions made about the definition of religion and in the methods used to interpret and identify religious life in culture. Rather than studying religion sociologically, that is, from the outside *in*, Chandler’s approach is more theological, that is, from the inside *out*. Though this does not delegitimize her case, it does make her argument less pervious to social-scientific inquiry and thus, less persuasive. Chandler’s method leads her and others like her to deemphasize the observable characteristics of religion. Therefore, Chandler argues the equation of religion with sport or other cultural topics undermines our understanding of each reality and phenomenon. If the assumptions and claims of Chandler and others like her are accepted, then, indeed the comparison of religion and sport or any other cultural activity fails. However, their approach may have more drawbacks than my theory.

Their objection to the cross-cultural analysis laid out in this paper is not unanimously supported among academics. The majority of my essay scrutinizes the phenomena and terms of religion and sport through a social scientific lens. This is because the socio-historical development and evolution of human civilizations reflects power relationships, unique timing,

¹⁴⁶ Chandler, 57.

¹⁴⁷ Even if they only provide limited religious insight or meaning, this would still be relevant to and expressive of analogous forms of religious life in culture (i.e. civil religion).

¹⁴⁸ Chandler, 59.

and cultural topography that actively form the meaning of our language.¹⁴⁹ Further, these important events in history, which are responsible for shaping the term and category “religion,” are more likely to be ignored in a theological, inside out approach like Chandler’s. The study of religion therefore, must emphasize and build on the historical events, developments, and socio-cultural nuances that have come to characterize the discipline and cause its formations.¹⁵⁰

In the article, “‘Religion,’ ‘Religions,’ ‘Religious,’” J.Z. Smith challenges the meaning and accuracy of language used in the academic study of religion. He writes to show how the term “religion,” which “describes human thought and action, most frequently in terms of belief and norms of behavior” carries anthropological meaning, and not theological meaning.¹⁵¹ His historical analysis reveals that early usage strongly contrasts with contemporary usage of “religion,” “religions,” and “religious.”¹⁵² Both Roman and early Christian Latin usages of “religion” and its adverbial and adjectival forms indicated conscientious repetitive actions that represented a more generic conception of religion than today’s meaning.¹⁵³ Smith explains that this rhetorical and discursive context never defines religion per se because “its meaning must be sought in words associated with it as well as its synonyms.”¹⁵⁴¹⁵⁵ By the 16th century, colonialism strengthened and colonialists became “solely responsible for the content of the term,” which

¹⁴⁹ Masuzawa, “Are We There Yet? Ruminations on the Post-Secular.”

¹⁵⁰ McCutcheon, 27. The importance of recognizing “that our predecessors were themselves operating, as we are, in complex, inherited social worlds not of their making,” is critical in accurately describing the agency of so-called religious actors, beliefs, behaviors, and institutions. This is why McCutcheon prefers ‘social formation’ to ‘religious formation,’ a category, he says, with little theoretical value.

¹⁵¹ J.Z. Smith, 269.

¹⁵² J.Z. Smith, 270.

¹⁵³ J.Z. Smith, 270.

¹⁵⁴ J.Z. Smith, 270.

¹⁵⁵ Smith’s argument points to the difficulty and problems encountered by a singular definition of “religion.” In an op-ed, “Why Can’t The New York Times’ Religion Columnist Define Religion?” Damon Linker responds to Mark Oppenheimer’s piece, “When Some Turn to Church, Others Go to CrossFit,” which extends “religiosity” to the social gym, CrossFit. The arguments made by Oppenheimer, which Linker objects to are similar to my claims and Chandler’s objections. I believe the defense of my position and Oppenheimer’s is supported here by Smith’s historical account of religion.

resulted in “the major expansion of the use and understanding of the term ‘religion.’”¹⁵⁶ These historical developments helped to create the categories of our modern language that Smith seeks to challenge.

In discussing the expansion of the term “religion,” J.Z. Smith argues that before the reification of the term and in relation to ritual practice, religion “became an item in an inventory of cultural topics that could be presented either ethnographically in terms of a particular people... or in a cross-cultural encyclopedia under the heading of ‘ritual’ or ‘religion.’”¹⁵⁷ He notes that although in the term’s English adverbial construction, “religiously” could designate a profane ritual, like “she reads the morning newspaper religiously,” the essentially Catholic understanding and translation of ritual as “customs” brought the unintended consequence of recording and labeling other people’s myths and beliefs.¹⁵⁸ This alteration, he argues, gave rise to the comparative and critical study of categories like “antiquities” and categories of otherness such as “idolatry” and “cannibalism.”¹⁵⁹ The latter understanding of the term brought a pivotal change to the meaning and usage of “religion” as these Western ecclesiastical terms for comparative study were disseminated around the world. The arguments made by Chandler, Higgs, Braswell, and others embody a narrowing semantic interpretation of modern theology, theory, and language.¹⁶⁰ Although these claims cannot be proved wrong, the pitfalls of their narrow approach are explained above and shown to be intellectually incomplete.

¹⁵⁶ J.Z. Smith, 269.

¹⁵⁷ J.Z. Smith, 270.

¹⁵⁸ J.Z. Smith, 270.

¹⁵⁹ J.Z. Smith, 269.

¹⁶⁰ Gill, 91.

CONCLUSION

In *The World in 2016*, the 30th edition of *The Economist's* annual collection of predictions for the year ahead, Roger Goodell, National Football League (NFL) commissioner, is among the elite guest contributors. In the article, "The Super Bowl at 50, and beyond," he looks to a future for American football, which could include teams based outside the United States and regular-season games in Mexico.¹⁶¹ Goodell explains that the rapid global increase in technology and mass media will catapult the NFL into the next half-century, "when our game will evolve and thrive in new ways with new fans in new lands."¹⁶² The changing nature of American football and people's connection to sport described here is not unlike the continually changing political and discursive contexts that create the meanings and usages of our descriptive categories of religion and other cultural topics.¹⁶³ The theories and methods of this paper use cultural and sociological analysis to identify how critical terms in religious studies like "religion," "religiosity," and "religious experience," can be critically applied to the study of sporting events as well as other cultural activities. When these terms are engaged I show they extend to topics in culture, such as sports, through creating religious experiences and meaning for Americans that contribute to their religiosity and American identity. In short, this analysis explains how religion exists from the pews to the bleachers.

In this paper I try to be careful when using the categories "religion," "religiosity," or "religious experience," because they can convey and impose Western characteristics and ecclesiastical understandings of religion. If these terms are to remain accurate and meaningful in discourse, scholars must recognize the rhetorical inaccuracy of limiting the scope for what qualifies as religion or religiosity. This mistake can be seen in any attempt to define or

¹⁶¹ Goodell.

¹⁶² Goodell.

¹⁶³ Alpert, 95.

distinguish a religious experience if it bears specific, determinate nature that can be systematically placed among world religions. A nature and system that Sharf argues rests on tenuous and subjective ground because its authority is rooted in the emergence and dominance of Western institutions and ecclesiastical thinking devoted to the comparative study of “Western” and “Eastern” thought.¹⁶⁴

To be clear, there are two assumptions I am claiming are inaccurate. First, that any experience, let alone a religious experience, can have determinate, essential nature. Second, that the category “world religions” is a fair and useful category with distinct compartments and implications.¹⁶⁵ McCutcheon argues that when scholars of religion “presume from the outset that their datum is distinct, autonomous, or simply put, *sui generis*” their scholarship “romanticizes and thereby depoliticizes historical, human interactions and institutions.”¹⁶⁶ The consequence is conceiving of so-called religious phenomena or experience as “independent variables that have sociopolitical implications, but *not* causes.”¹⁶⁷ If research that asserts the sociopolitical autonomy of religion continues, the theoretical implications of this paper and many others cannot be brought to light. Therefore, theories and descriptions of religion ought to leave behind *sui generis* religion and embrace the sociopolitical context responsible for history and the datum for disciplines in the social sciences.

¹⁶⁴ Sharf, 98. In Chapter 6 of *Critics Not Caretakers*, “The Economics of Spiritual Luxury: The Glittering Lobby and the World’s Parliament of Religions,” McCutcheon contests the legitimacy of this style of presenting and studying religion, calling it inaccurate and contradictory. He writes that, in scholarship “these contradictions are disguised and glossed over by means of homogenizing strategies and tropes” (99). For example, “world religions” is one of these tropes that subsumes heterogeneous complex historical human beings under a single global agenda. To show how this rhetoric produces thorny problems for scholars of religion, McCutcheon turns to the theoretical setting of the 1993 World’s Parliament of Religion in Chicago, which was hosted in the Palmer House Hilton. In the context of capitalism and economic metaphors, McCutcheon concludes that the global agenda of the Parliament was “the commodification of heterogeneous historical human beings, packaged as ‘spiritual,’ ‘businessmen,’ ‘junkie,’ ‘crazy,’ and ‘ordinary.’”

¹⁶⁵ Chesnek and Masuzawa also argue these assumptions, respectively, are false.

¹⁶⁶ McCutcheon, 85.

¹⁶⁷ McCutcheon, 85.

Throughout this paper I have presented suggestions, not proofs, for how sport can function religiously or function analogously to religion. Mainly, the strength of this study lies in its approach, which accounts for more data than other theories for several reasons. First, as the discussions on religion and religious experience show, the language and labels used in the study of religion are formative and expressive of the subject's experiences, behaviors, and beliefs. Therefore, these terms deserve a wider interpretation than traditional definitions lend them in Western history and language. This supports the possibility that religious life extends from religious institutions into society and popular culture, as displayed by Bellah's analogous concept of civil religion. Second, modern sport in America, characterized by football, the Super Bowl, TV and marketing has exploited and expedited certain elements of sport, like ritualized violence and offensive-oriented strategies, that participants and observers find entertaining and religious. In other words, the branding of modern sport has emphasized religious dimensions that in effect have sanctified the content and experience of sport for some. However, it's not just TV and marketing that explain the ties of modern sport and religion. Ritual and sacrifice demonstrate a natural connection between sport and the sacred through the prism of violence. In America this relationship manifests in the legacy of militarism in venues of sport as a means of ritual and sacrificial worship to the country's civil religion.

Although this paper's claims are supported by views from a number of scholars and disciplines, there is still much to be understood by future research. As commitment to institutional religion declines in the West and as certain topics ascend and expand in popular culture, the cultural analyses of sport and other cultural activities' religious dimensions and their influence in American culture ought to increase. In America, the post-World War II era was characterized by three major developments that help explain why sport's popularity increased

and religious attendance decreased, although not in an inverse relationship. Suburbanization, growing affluence, and television sets in homes help rationalize the cultural shift of the 1960s and 70s that made not going to Church acceptable and that irrevocably changed America's social fabric as scenes from the Civil Rights Movement were broadcasted across the country and world. Given the sociopolitical context of this paper's data, it would be useful to study similar datum in different contexts. For example, in less developed countries where there is little affluence and media access, what explains a local population's obsession with a specific sport?

In his volume, *After Heaven*, Robert Wuthnow reconstructs how American spirituality has shifted from a spirituality of dwelling in a particular house of worship or religion to a spirituality of seeking in the past half-century.¹⁶⁸ Under this new conception of religiosity, is it possible for people like devoted sport fans, fanatic foodies, or radical environmentalists to be considered "religious" or "spiritual" for their pursuit of these activities? In *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville writes on the "Public Spirit in the United States" and finds that patriotism, "is itself a sort of religion."¹⁶⁹ This theory highlights the connection between sport and America's militaristic and nationalistic identities. Adam Smith argues in *The Wealth of Nations* that particular branches of commerce, like sport and entertainment, could replace religion as the secularization of modern commercial society continues.¹⁷⁰ To what extent are these hypotheses on society and religious life accurate? In what ways can a country's social, economic, and political contexts cause religions to strengthen, weaken, or manifest in other cultural forms?

¹⁶⁸ Wuthnow, 7.

¹⁶⁹ Tocqueville, 235.

¹⁷⁰ Smith A., 690-748. In explaining the narrative of secularization, Smith claims that science "is the great antidote to the poison of enthusiasm and superstition."

The theories and definitions of this paper can help inform and guide these future studies on how and why sport and a broader set of cultural activities are approached from a point of religious studies scholarship. I urge those who do pursue these fields of inquiry to remain aware and cautious of the reified, ecclesiastical, and Western notions imposed by modern usages of “religion.” If these biases are not acknowledged and/or dealt with then there seems little point in debating the extent to which religion and its forms extend in culture.¹⁷¹ If however, the understanding of religion and its descriptions can expand, as this paper shows they do, then scholars may continue to produce cultural analysis that enriches discourse and illuminates the religious dimensions of our lives, our cultural activities, and our sports.

¹⁷¹ In his essay, “Embodied Theology,” Sam Gill recommends three antidotes to the poison of our embodied worldview; gain multiple perspectives, encompass self-awareness, and make rigorous comparisons whenever possible. I recommend Gil’s essay and his three measures to anyone who picks up and continues this scholarship.

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