
Title	Christianity and sport: A promising combination
Author(s)	T. H. Sung and N. G. Aplin
Source	<i>III International Conference of Physical Education and Sports Science (III ICPESS 2010) on "Youth in Physical Education and Sport", Singapore, 25 - 28 May 2010</i>
Organised by	Physical Education & Sports Science Academic Group, National Institute of Education (Singapore)

This document may be used for private study or research purpose only. This document or any part of it may not be duplicated and/or distributed without permission of the copyright owner.

The Singapore Copyright Act applies to the use of this document.

Copyright © 2010 by National Institute of Education (Singapore)

CHRISTIANITY AND SPORT: A PROMISING COMBINATION

D.T.H. SUNG AND N.G. APLIN

*National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University,
1 Nanyang Walk, Singapore 637616. Email: gnus_lyrad@yahoo.com.sg; nicholas.aplin@nie.edu.sg*

The relationship between Christianity and sport has been a continuing theme in human endeavour particularly during the last 150 years. This paper examines concepts associated with the role of Christian ideals and the evolution of modern sports. Early ideas of Muscular Christianity provide a backdrop for an examination of contemporary issues relating to the significance of Christianity with current sporting practices. Modern sport has moved beyond the traditional notions of Muscular Christianity espoused passionately by Thomas Arnold at Rugby School and later by G.E.L Cotton at Marlborough College during the middle of the 19th century to a more globalised form of games and sports ethics, whereby Christianity is being integrated more openly as a new dimension. The purpose of this study is to examine and measure the influence of Christianity on the sports culture and to understand its impact on the current professional and commercial era. Interviews with sportsmen and coaches highlight contemporary insights in the Singapore context.

1 Introduction

A close ideological link between rugged muscularity and devout Christian beliefs was established in the middle of the nineteenth century. The cult of athleticism, which grew in the British public school system, provided imperialist missionary tendencies with a solid support system. Muscular Christianity developed progressively during the latter part of the second half of the 19th century, sustaining a compelling vision of how Christians and others viewed the relationship between sports, physical fitness and spirituality.

The phrase 'Muscular Christianity' was probably adopted from the writings of Charles Kingsley and often from Thomas Hughes' vivid portrayal of 'Tom Brown's Schooldays' (1856), where the development of a strong, virtuous and masculine young man was depicted – a Protestant role model (Putney, 2001). The original intent of this ideology was very much to be utilised as a disciplinary procedure to mould young men with the notion of Kingsleyan manliness (Mangan, 2006). Thomas Arnold, the Headmaster of Rugby School and a focal point of Hughes' novel, saw the integration of Muscular Christianity as a means of educating Christian gentlemen. Arnold believed that sport provided an impeccable method of diffusing loutish behaviour. His revelation of using sport as a means of disciplining, training and adding spiritual growth to his unruly young men in school spread to many other Public schools, like Marlborough College,

where Cotton used sport systematically to keep the school in order and to provide the boys with a wide range of productive activities. The boys took the legacy on with them to universities like Oxford and Cambridge (Mangan, 2006).

Consequently, Muscular Christianity became an appropriate vehicle for advancing British Imperialism. Sports, like cricket and football, played a key role in enabling Britain to demonstrate her power and dominance by building strong cultural ties. The British transmitted their sporting ideals, values, practices and tenets of Muscular Christianity throughout the different colonies, creating strong bonds.

Since the birth of Muscular Christianity, a tight linkage has been forged between sport and Christianity (Crepeau, 2001). The genesis of Muscular Christianity became a cornerstone of sport and influenced the development of games and physical training in the modern educational system. Since the advent of '*sport globalisation*' which has overtaken sporting imperialism, history has shown that the underlying purpose of synergising Christianity and sport as a disciplinary tool has dynamically changed and evolved into a series of events, institutions and ideologies that have impacted the sports culture.

Examples of Muscular Christianity during the Victorian period, when it was developed as an evangelical tool, can be seen in the lives of athletes such as C.T. Studd in the late 19th century and the 'flying Scotsman', Eric Liddell in the early 20th century, both of whom decided to relinquish their distinguished athletic careers to become missionaries in China. The Young Men's Christian Association (formed in 1844) and the Boy's Brigade movement (formed in 1883) were also products of the spread of Muscular Christianity.

In the 20th century, evangelist Billy Graham used athletes and coaches in his travelling ministry; establishing sports ambassadors in groups such as '*Youth for Christ*' (1950s), '*The Fellowship of Christian Athletes*' (1954) and '*Athletes in Action*' (1963). Subsequently, many other prominent athletes and coaches, such as James Naismith, created an alliance between Christianity and Sports.

2 The Olympic Movement Joins In

The core message of the Olympic movement is that the *most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part, just as the most important thing in life is not to the triumph but the struggle*. This was a bi-product of Baron Pierre de Coubertin's reverence for the ideology of Muscular Christianity. He attributed his ideas and thoughts to the legacy of Thomas Arnold. Coubertin was a lifelong muscular Christian, although he placed more emphasis on the 'muscular' than on the 'Christian'. He stressed that the sports field was a "*laboratory for manliness...an incomparable pedagogical tool*" (Lucas, 1976, p. 51).

As the sporting ideals of the Olympic Games also promote the pursuit of excellence, there seems to be a paradox concerning the achievement of different goals. Do Christian goals still have a place when winning is so vigorously pursued? To answer this question –

in a Singapore context – insights and perspectives were sought from local coaches and athletes. These are individuals who have are convicted about the application of ideologies of Muscular Christianity within the modern context. The transformation that now appears to exist is that Muscular Christians have been superseded by ‘Christian Sportsmen’.

3 Background

This exploratory study builds from the assumption that the dominant element embodied in the sporting culture today is one that emphasises professionalisation and commercialiation. The impact of such rational approaches has led to the undermining of moral and ethical standards, raising questions about the direction in which the sporting world appears to be heading.

This concern is apparently evident in two recent examples of sports news: (1) Andre Agassi, eight-time Grand Slam winner, admitted the use of drugs and then lying to cover his tracks; and (2) Susan Finkelstein, from Philadelphia, was charged with prostitution after offering sexual services in exchange for baseball World Series tickets.

Twenty years earlier, Hägele (1989) noted that the inner value structure of Olympic sport, which repeatedly proclaimed the principle of ‘inviolability and dignity of the athletes’, was threatening to degenerate into nothing more than empty words”. Indeed, moral and ethical standards in the sporting world have been constantly challenged by the athletes.

4 The Study

A key question was put to the participants in this study: How would you evaluate the current sporting culture in terms of its moral and ethical standards?

Typical amongst the answers was the sense there is a lack of integrity and sportsmanship. Athletes were finding new and even illegal methods to aid their performance; standards were being eroded. Newsworthy stories focused on bad attitude, cheating and infidelity. There was little evidence of sportsmanship. Underlying the pursuit of glory was the uncomfortably negative perception of sport which occurred with the toxic combination of professionalism, commercialization and media exposure.

The spirit of ‘sportsmanship’, one of the character traits ascribed to an ideal Olympiad, seems to have lost its prevalence and significance in the hearts of athletes today. Good sportsmanship was not just a mere impartial component which is separated from Christian ideals e.g. Godliness, but a direct manifestation of it. A Christian sportsman should be a role model, exemplifying Godly values in whatever opportunities are given, which includes the behaviour on the pitch or ground during both practices and competition. The moment sport takes the primary focus of one’s life, referring to the professionalism of sports, issues with money, status quo, achievements, and the inherent desire to win will be inevitable, causing the athletes to find themselves trapped in the vicious cycle of ‘winning indulgence’. This immense pressure to succeed is caused by a

dominant mentality of 'victory at any price', contributing to the rapid increase in temptation to improve personal performance through unethical means (Hägele, 1989).

There are built-in conflicts between Christian beliefs and participation in elite sports. Christianity emphasises the importance of process over product, showing care and respect for others over the emphasis on winning and self-glorification. There has been a shift in focus in the motivation of athletes today, especially due to the globalisation of sports where professionalisation, commercialisation and politicisation drive the sport to become a means to an end, no longer an end in itself (Aplin, 2009).

There have been exceptions. John Wooden, who anchored his life and coaching philosophies in the tenets of Christianity, was a 'one-of-a-kind' type of coach who espoused three fundamental rules: '*Never be late*', '*One word of profanity and you're done for the day*' and '*Treat your opponents with respect*'. To Wooden, winning and success were not synonymous. He never mentioned 'winning', preferring to stress the effort required for each individual to do his best – that was success. Wooden also stressed the importance of character over reputation, breaking the *habitus* in the sporting culture, overwriting the dominant element of 'Winning at any price' mentality.

A second question was posed relating to the perceived need for balance: *Is there a balance between 'Winning' and 'Character Development', or is it always a trade-off between the two?*

The consensus was that there is always an opportunity for both to occur, and the process of preparation to win could reinforce or build character. Performing had to be steered ethically. Winning could not be the sole goal – overcoming was seen as a universal goal, or put another way it was about reaching potential. This supported Wooden's ideology.

The ideologies and values that prevail tend to provide a cornerstone for sports participation and involvement, creating a normative framework which shapes the sporting culture. Wooden's ideology reflects biblical teachings that believers are called to be 'overcomers', staying steadfast under trials, rather than just mere conquerors (The Holy Bible, 2005). Thus, one might anticipate the re-emergence of an 'overcoming' attitude to supersede that of a 'winning' one to develop if the spirit of sport advocated by Coubertin at the end of the 19th century is to be revived.

5 The Modern Approach

In the 21st century sporting world, many athletes deal with such conflict by infusing tenets of Muscular Christianity into their involvement. Athletes redefine their association with sports to fit their definitions and convictions of the supposed 'being' and 'doing' of a Christian sportsman. It was found that many Christian athletes adopted two common strategies: First by defining their sport involvement as means of glorifying God, and second by defining sports involvement as a platform to spread the Gospel (Coakley, 2003).

Due to the symbiotic relationship between sport and the mass media, the globalisation of sports can be a medium for the ideals of Christianity to be displayed. For example, the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games was watched by almost 3.7 billion people worldwide underscoring why companies are willing to invest and sign official sponsorships to boost their visibility and market presence. Similarly, Christian sportsmen can tap into this phenomenon to reach audiences at a larger scale.

Prayer has been noticeable throughout the sporting arena and seemingly the most frequently utilised method of Christianity by coaches and athletes. Prayer is an important component of Christianity and thus, it is invariably included in the sporting experiences of athletes. Another form of demonstration is when Christian athletes publically thank God for their achievements, using their visibility to express their beliefs to others. Kaka, a renowned Brazilian football player, is well-known for showing devout Christian slogans on his T-shirts. Another commonly seen combination is the coupling use of sport as a platform for the expounding of Christianity, exemplifying values and ideals of a Christian athlete. One local observer indicated that it is important that people see Christ in and through these athletes, allowing Christ to be glorified and made known to the masses.

Such demonstrations may provoke negative responses however. In the United States, battles have been fought over the use of prayers before, during and after sporting competitions. Controversial issues concerning religious freedom have become court issues. In Europe too, Kaka's overt display of Christianity on-field resulted in warning letters being issued to the Brazilian football federation. Players who display personal, religious or political views on the football pitch can be banned.

All the interviewees noted that audiences generally go with what the media promotes and what the sporting bodies emphasise. This leads to the degrading of the Olympic spirit as being just another cliché and the ostracising of Christian athletes, who are manifestations of Christianity and of the Olympic spirit.

6 Conclusion

Muscular Christianity has played a significant role in the history of sports, not just physically and spiritually, but also in the social aspects of the society as a whole. The dynamic applications of this movement fostered a shift in focus since the late 19th century till now, integrating faith and spiritual elements with sports, exhibiting the relevance of Christianity with the test of time. In view of the critical issue of 'Winning at all cost' in the sporting world, a possible antidote can be John Wooden's credible definition of 'success', strongly founded by tenets of Christianity which can prove to be a vital emergent element in the 21st century sporting world. An article noted "It is pure Wooden – simple yet ingenious, zeroing in on what really matters" (Horowitz, 2004, p.1). Thus, whether or not the fusion of Christianity and sports can become a mediator to revitalise the sporting culture to its original intent, the combination should continue to persevere, focusing on the basic values and purposes of sports. Sports and Christianity should

complement each other, enhancing and completing one another to promote the educating of the mind and motivating of the will of an athlete, the development of society and human culture, and the goal making peace with one another. As it is written in the Bible, one should continue to “fight the good fight, finish the race, and keep the faith” (The Holy Bible, 2005).

References

- Aplin N.G. (2009) *The Passage of Time: Laying the Foundations of Sport*. In Aplin N. (Ed.) *Perspectives on Physical Education and Sports Science in Singapore: An Eye on the Youth Olympics 2010*. McGraw-Hill, Education Singapore.
- Coakley J. (2003) *Sports in Society: Issues and Controversies* (8th ed.) McGraw-Hill Companies, New York.
- Crepeau R.C. (2001) *Playing with God: The History of Athletes Thanking the “Big Man Upstairs*. (online) Available: <http://www.poppolitics.com/archives/2001/03/Playing-with-God-The-history-of-athletes-thanking-the-big-man-upstairs>. (Accessed: 18 Oct, 2009)
- Hagele W. (1989) *The Crisis in Sport*. Munchen, Germany.
- Horowitz M. (2004) *From the Socks Up: The Extraordinary Coaching Life of John Wooden*. (online) Available: <http://www.mitchhorowitz.com/johnwooden.html>. (Accessed: 5 Oct, 2009)
- Lee J.W. (n.d.) *Prayer in American Scholastic Sport*. (online) Accessed: 28 Oct, 2009.
- Lucas J.A. (1976) Victorian Muscular Christianity: Prologue to the Olympic Games, *Olympic Review*, 99/100, 49-52.
- Mangan J.A. (2006) *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School*. Cambridge University Press, Great Britain.
- Putney C. (2001) *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge.
- The Holy Bible (2005) *Today's New International Version*. The Zondervan Corporation, USA.