

*Sports and Christianity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, Watson, N.J. and Parker, A. (eds.), Abingdon: Routledge, 2013, 286 pages (not including indexing), £80.00, ISBN (10) 0415899222 (Hardback).

The volume of academic literature concerning the interaction between sport and faith has been steadily increasing over the last thirty years. This is the first text, however, which seeks specifically to consider the interaction between Christianity and sport. The editors of this text have made significant contributions to the body of knowledge concerning psychological (Watson) and sociological (Parker) elements of this interaction; this text represents both the coming-together of their respective fields of study and a staging post from which future scholarship in this area of study can be launched. The purpose of this book is to reflect on the ways in which the underpinning principles of the Christian faith might allow consideration of the challenges, values and practices of modern-day sport. Additionally, this text seeks to consider how these challenges, values and practices might enhance the way in which we see the future of sport both in terms of its participatory and structural formation. Watson and Parker believe that such reflections will develop our understanding of the relationship between sport and Christianity, whilst also hoping that the text will further the desire for ongoing empirical scholarship. In order to do so, Watson and Parker have put together a stellar cast of scholars featuring the leading writers in this area. This review seeks to comment on the relative value of the various contributions within Watson and Parker's text and critique how they sit within the broader literature in their respective fields.

Following the introduction, the book is split into two parts comprising first historical and second contemporary perspectives on sport and Christianity. The first part opens with the book's signature chapter, written by the editors, which makes up nearly a third of the overall word count of the text including the impressive 32 pages of references. The aim is to "comprehensively identify, critically appraise and synthesize scholarship, primary empirical research and initiatives on the relationship between Sport and Christianity from 1850 to the present day" (p. 10). Watson and Parker begin with the relatively unusual step of discussing the work of specific pioneering scholars in the field such as Michael Novak, Shirl Hoffman, Robert (Jack) Higgs, Joseph L. Price and several others, most of whom have contributed in some way to this text (Novak authored the forward); this is an incredibly useful overview for those new to this area of study. Watson and Parker then go on to discuss theologies of play in sport, Muscular Christianity and sports ministry, theological ethics in sport commensurate with the themes of their established scholarly interests. One of Watson and Parker's key findings is that whilst there is has been considerable scholarly interest and writing relating to the interaction between sport and Christianity, there is a desperate lack of quality empirical research. Whilst this is

a relatively unsurprising conclusion for those with any experience of searching for empirical research in this area, the manner in which Watson and Parker have constructed this opening substantive chapter gives this call genuine credence. They identify a range of examples of emerging and needed research comprising a) Theological analysis of disability sport, including reflection on institutions, such as the Paralympics and Special Olympics; b) The various uses of prayer in sport; c) The theory and practice of sport chaplaincy; d) Theological reflection on exercise and health, two concepts that are closely linked to sports; e) Women, sport and the Christian religion; f) Sport, religion and popular culture; g) Beauty and aesthetics in traditional and alternative/extreme sports; h) Relationships in sporting contexts.

Having drawn on Ladd and Mathisen's (1999) work, Watson and Parker surmise that contemporary advocates of Muscular Christianity "often uncritically adopt tenets of contemporary sporting culture that have little, if any, affinity with the gospel of Christ" (p. 24); this assertion is also addressed by Hoffman later within this text. Numerous other gaps in our knowledge and understanding are highlighted as being in need of further empirical work such as the extensive and challenging list of questions pertaining to the relationship between Christians and competition which are proposed at the bottom of page 31. One potentially exciting suggestion relates to the writings of Thomas à Kempis, Oswald Chambers, Francois Fenelon, Andrew Murray and C. S. Lewis proposing that scholars should engage with applying such material to contemporary issues in sport. The comprehensive, thorough and engaging way in which this seminal chapter is constructed affirms the value of this text on this component alone. This chapter is a must-read for all scholars interested in the relationship between sport and Christianity.

Many evangelical Christians with sporting interests cite St. Paul's athletic metaphors when starting to think about the relationship between their faith and sport. This topic is addressed in the second chapter of this text by Victor Pfitzner who has written extensively in this area for some years. This is a carefully constructed chapter which features extensive reference to both scripture and contemporary research. Pfitzner is able to add to his previous work by extending the cultural and exegetical analysis within this chapter. Pfitzner suggests St. Paul's approach was based in the belief that "athletic metaphors held such imaginative power for the apostle Paul that he could be confident that his message would be enhanced by their use" (p. 89). Fundamentally, Pfitzner is keen to stress that St. Paul's use of athletic metaphors appears to stress that for evangelical Christians, personal achievement should give way to the collective ambition to strive together for the advancement of the gospel. In chapter three, eminent historian Hugh McLeod discusses sport and religion in England c1790-1914. The need for such a chapter in this text is clearly evident; McLeod is

able to navigate the reader through the relationship between sport and religion in Victorian Britain better than most. In this chapter McLeod seeks to unpack the evolution of the alliances and tensions within this relationship. Nevertheless, McLeod's chapter struggles to offer a fresh perspective on material which will be relatively familiar to those with experience in this field. McLeod's highlighting of four major areas of tension: "the impact of professionalism, the persistence of gambling, differing ideas on the use of time (including Sunday) and the fear that sport was becoming a new religion" (p. 122) won't surprise even relatively novice scholars. McLeod's analysis of Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown Schooldays* is equally familiar.

Shirl Hoffman's seminal texts *Sport and Religion* (1992) and *Good Game: Christianity and the culture of sports* (2010) ensure that any chapter by this author is keenly anticipated. In chapter four, Hoffman focusses on the relationship between sport and evangelism in North America. Whilst Hoffman's tone is typically sceptical, the style of this chapter is a little different from his previous works and so this chapter feels like a valuable addition to his body of literature. Hoffman essentially argues the church sought to use sport as a socially respectable platform from which to evangelise but has not done enough to challenge the ethical vacuum that is professional sport. Hoffman suggests that the church's utilisation of the status of Christian athletes is not justified without a deliberate attempt to instil Christian virtues in sport. Hoffman also suggests that the lack of focus on how sporting involvement fits with the Christian life is further evidence that the church's sole interest in sport has been utilisation rather than reformation. Hoffman suggests that the lack of action on behalf of the church in challenging the ethical problems inherent with professional sport has led to contradictory behaviours by Christian athletes, particularly when considering their on-field and off-field roles. Hoffman suggests that while athletes' are expected to lead morally Christ-inspired lives away from sport, their accepted on-field behaviours are much less ethical. As with several issues within this text, the lack of empirical support for this assertion is stark; scholars in this field inevitably have to return to Stevenson's (1991; 1997) papers which focus on elite Christian collegiate athletes in the USA to find any primary research relating to this topic. The final chapter in this first part of the text is authored by Robert (Jack) Higgs and is entitled stereotypes and archetypes in religion and American sport. Within this chapter, Higgs utilises poetry, among various other mediums, to illustrate his argument. Nonetheless, this chapter is incredibly dense and struggles to offer the reader a digestible and comprehensible perspective. The extent that this chapter contributes to the overall purpose of this text is, therefore, greatly limited.

Part 2 of this text concerns contemporary perspectives on sport and Christianity and opens with a chapter entitled 'Special Olympians as a 'Prophetic Sign' to the Modern Sporting Babel' by Watson.

What follows is arguably the most original chapter within the text, offering a crucial and engaging debate concerning the relationship between sports ministry and disability sport. Watson's typically thorough scholarly style is again in evidence here (a further 10 pages of references are listed) as he reviews the disciplines of the theology of disability and of disability sport. One of Watson's key messages revolves around the status of athletes with a disability as he calls on the church to embrace the authenticity and beauty of the performances of these individuals. Given this almost completely new area of study, Watson's subsequent call for empirical research is hardly surprising; nevertheless, this chapter should represent an excellent starting point from which a thriving body of scholarly work can emerge. The theological underpinning of Watson's narrative is clearly evident and is also supplemented by the occasional reference to scripture. Neither of these elements are to be found within Tracy Trothen's chapter concerning the Technoscience Enhancement Debate in Sports. The purpose of this chapter is to "argue that when the issue is reframed as a theological one, centred on a postmodern feminist understanding of transcendence, ethical interrogation surfaces additional issues concerning values, difference, visibility, relationship, hope and the sacred" (p. 208). What follows is a well-crafted and insightful chapter addressing this aim. Nevertheless, the theological basis or application is never made clear to the reader and subsequently this chapter feels a little out of place in this text. Similar criticisms could be levelled at Jacob L. Goodson's chapter concerning the quest for perfection in the sport of baseball. This chapter discusses the use of steroids in Major League Baseball utilising virtue ethics as the theoretical foundation and the specific lens of magnanimity. Goodson proposes that a framework of individual magnanimity is inappropriate and proposes a principle of team magnanimity based in charity and friendship. Whilst Goodson utilises the term 'theology'; its overall value to the purpose of this book is unclear.

Whilst Trothen's and Goodson's chapters only tangentially address the overall purpose of this text, the final two chapters, authored by Kevin Lixey and Scott Kretchmar respectively, are essential reading and highly pertinent to the topic area. Lixey provides a much-needed review of the Catholic church's pronouncements concerning sport; a useful supplement to his recent text (see Lixey, Hübenthal, Mieth and Müller (2012)). Whilst many might be uncomfortable with Lixey's seeming intransigence to accept value in sporting endeavour which is more serious than could be considered playful, most scholars will be intrigued by the volume and insight of the papal pronouncements which this chapter features. Scholars aware of Simon's (2003) conception of competition might also be frustrated at Lixey's relatively narrow discussion in this area, particularly given his concluding remarks upholding the importance of respect, sacrifice and responsibility. Nonetheless, Lixey highlights the extent to which the Catholic church has sought to embrace the educational benefits of sporting participation, despite some widespread belief to the contrary. Lixey's proposition to

broaden the role of coaches and leaders to be more aware of the holistic, in this case spiritual, development of young people sits well alongside other contemporary writing in this area (see Kidman and Hanrahan, 2011). Whilst Lixey's approach is engaging and insightful, it does little to address the broader calls of this text to contribute to the empirical underpinning of this area of research. A similar criticism could be made of the final substantive chapter in which Kretchmar questions the compatibility of sporting achievements and spiritual humility. Nonetheless, as is typical of Kretchmar's work, he is able to offer a theoretical insightful and engaging contribution to round off this text. Kretchmar begins by underlining the potential dichotomy the chapter title outlines, but argues that the two concepts are much more mutually dependent than might be naturally assumed. Kretchmar summarises "that sporting and spiritual progress is dependent on humility, but in a messy, complicated kind of way, one that does not exclude elements of pride" (p. 282). Kretchmar is cautious of pronouncing whether sport should be considered as a useful platform for the development of humility, asserting that this concept is, of course, much more complicated than that. Nevertheless, Kretchmar demonstrates a more insightful view of contemporary sport than Lixey a couple of chapters earlier and also provides a useful launching pad for future scholarly attention and a natural extension of this text by also considering Islam and Buddhism.

Overall, this book represents an absolute must-read for those beginning or experienced scholars with an interest in this field. The opening chapter alone makes this book a worthwhile purchase and provides an invaluable basis for the rest of the text. Whilst the value of the remaining chapters to achieving the overall aim of the text is variable, there are undoubtedly a number of contributions, most notably from Hoffman, Watson, Lixey and Kretchmar which genuinely extend the scholarship of this field and also provide a platform from which future work can be launched. It is impossible not to agree with a key conclusion of this text; that the lack of empirical research in this area of study represents the most major challenge to our understanding of this most complicated of social interactions. Should scholars with an interest in this area will be inspired by the topics of investigation most in need of further empirical work which are highlighted throughout work, then this text will have achieved its most fundamental aim.

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