

Morality of Christian Athletes in Competitive Sports – A Review

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Athletes' moral beliefs and values are challenged by competitive sports just as long as the professional elite-sports system exists. Christian athletes, as a distinguished group among competing athletes, are supposed to be people with specific and distinctive moral guidelines in everyday life that they validly integrate in competitive sports as well. No matter if they are competing in triathlon, athletics, or playing soccer, if they are playing in the lowest or highest division of their sport, or if they are being faced with unmoral situations, that is what we expect. They therefore stand in contrast to some athletes of today's competitive sports who do not seem to have any guideline at all anymore, who would not shy at anything to win a competition and who therefore give competitive sports a rather negative touch. The following review should shed some light on the world of Christian sportsmen. The relationships in the field of Christianity, ethics, morality, and sports will be investigated in-depth via analyzing the relevant literature. Both theoretical and empirical findings will be systematized according to their inner structure. Even though the findings to report are rare, the particular field of study reveals itself as an under-researched topic, likewise theoretically and empirically.

Keywords: Christian athletes, Christianity, competitive sports, moral beliefs, moral values, sport ethics

Introduction

The combination of sports and religion might appear as a rather strange and unusual combination to most people. Being religious in the sense of being

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Christian and doing sports on a highly competitive level somehow does not fit together at first sight. Boxill (2003b, p. 107) claimed that the “intrinsic nature of competition is immoral” because competition is selfish, egoistic, “involves treating others as means, as enemies to be defeated, or as obstacles thwarting one’s victory or success, to be removed by any means possible”. Hoffman (1992b, p. 221, according to Slusher, 1992, pp. 227-236) stated that religion “holds up ideals of human perfection by legalism and by external absolutes that deny athletes the opportunity to be authentic”. With statements like this, it has often been challenged and doubted in various ways that a Christian can indeed successfully participate in competitive sports.

But how do Christian athletes cope with the “immorality” of professional sports? What moral values and beliefs do Christian athletes have in competitive sports, in which, according to Hoffman (1992b, p. 221, according to Slusher, 1992, pp. 227-236) “the highest morality [...] is the honesty to confront both the inherent pragmatism that underlies our games and the fact that we really don’t expect players of games to demonstrate the high ideals traditionally associated with sportsmanship”?

Firstly, we might observe the reality of elite sports through mass media. Every day we read or see the news of athletes breaking the rules of competition. But it seems to be a lot harder to find athletes with distinctive moral guidelines, so athletes such as soccer player Pedro Zamballa. Zamballa received an award for fair play for the reaction he showed in a match on November 2nd in 1969. The goalkeeper of the opposing team had collided with one of his own teammates so that both were unconscious. Zamballa could have scored an important goal, but he decided not to. Zamballa’s team lost 0-1.

Athletes of whom we somehow expect to have distinctive moral guidelines like Zamballa are Christian athletes. We expect them to obey the rules of the competition, to respect the limits that are given and also to demonstrate values such as fair play.

Subsequently, the aim of our paper is to identify the rare relevant investigations that have tackled the intersection between Christianity, ethics, morality, and sports.

Methods

Systematical reviews can normally take account into subject-related databases. However, established databases like EBSCO (including SPORTDiscus), ERIC, PsycINFO, PubMed, Spolit (German database by the Federal Institute

of Sport Science) and Web of Science did not return a lot relevant results on search queries for Christianity, ethics, morality, religion, and sports. Thus, established textbooks and monographs from the field of sports ethics, sociology, and cultural studies (Baker, 2000a; Boxill, 2003a; Coakley, 1986b; Coakley, 1991; Eitzen & Sage, 1989a; Griffith, 2004; Gustafson, 1981; Hargrove, 1979; Higgs & Braswell, 2004; Hoffman, 1992a; Hubbard, 1998; Ladd & Mathisen, 1999; Lawrence, 2005; Lay, 1993; McIntosh, 1979; Morgan, 2007; Pawlenka, 2004; Prebish, 1993; Roth, 2001; Schweiker, 2005; Ulrich, Engelhardt, & Treutlein, 2003) were the starting point for gathering the relevant literature. Furthermore, scanning the textbooks and retrieved texts' reference lists as well as serendipitous findings (Blaxter, Hughes, & Tight, 2001; Hart, 2001; Williamson, 1998) lead to the body of our review.

The presentation of the review results will be structured by multiple questions, that have come up during introspective contemplation: 1) Can religious ethics be combined with ethics of sports, which actually belong to the ethics of the profane world? 2) What is the relation between the two? 3) Are sports and Christianity seen as a rather good or bad combination? 4) How do religious athletes deal with that relation of ethics, sports and Christianity? 5) What empirical findings in the particular field of study can be found?

Findings

Philosophical Inquiries

Ethics of Christianity versus Ethics of Sports. Since sports belong to the sphere of the profane world, a more general comparison between the ethics of Christianity and the ethics of the profane world was therefore the aim of this subchapter. But that was not easier. During the literature analysis it became obvious that there is almost no literature, which clearly explains the relation between profane and religious ethics. Even in the very detailed *Handbuch der christlichen Ethik* (English translation: "Handbook of Christian Ethics") by Hertz, Korff, and Rendtorff (1993a; 1993b; 1993c), which consists of three volumes, basic information about the relation between religious and profane ethics could not be found. What supports this impression are statements as the one by Hargrove (1979) cited by Hoffman (1992b, p. 218) that conservative as well as liberal Christian approaches had a tendency to incorporate "heavy concentrations of social and political philosophy into their theologies such that it becomes difficult to separate ethical views based on religion from those representing an amalgam of religious and secular beliefs" or Hoffman's claim that most ethical decisions in life are usually made on an ad hoc basis with little evidence for consistency.

In his book *Sport: Kritik und Eigensinn. Der Sport der Gesellschaft* (English translation: "Sports: Critics and Stubbornness. Society and its Sports"), Gldenpfennig (2000) demonstrates how difficult it is to compare ethics in Christianity with ethics in sports or ethics of the profane world in general. He tries to answer the question whether the ethics of sports are inherited or taken over from religious ethics or if they completely contradict them. His article is therefore about the triangular relation between church, ethics, and sports. What is important to mention is that Gldenpfennig only uses the term "religion" and "church" in general, and not "Christianity". He therefore equalizes the term church` and faith`, and religion` and Christianity`, which is a very important distinction especially in the eyes of less fundamental believers.

One of the main questions Gldenpfennig (2000) begins with is: From where do we take the norms for our actions and behavior? This is a question, which is asked a lot in our society. The answer Gldenpfennig gives is the following: Ethical questions cannot be analyzed and interpreted correctly in a Christian-occidental culture without referring to Christian elements. But profane ethics do not lean on religious ethics, one only looks in how far religious ethics are compatible with profane ethics, and only then religious ethics are applied in profane life. Only then religious norms are suitable for universally accepted moral norms. Therefore it is not the religious ethics and norms which are the guidelines, but the secular and profane norms. Since sports belong to the domain of the profane world nowadays, it cannot be reached through the ethics of religion, but only the other way around.

Another claim Gldenpfennig (2000) makes is that universal Christian ethics and particular ethics in sports are hardly compatible with each other since they are very different in their paradigm of meaning. While in sports the paradigm of meaning includes elements such as fairness and equality of competition in a sphere of aesthetic play, the paradigm of meaning of the church centers around equity in a serious sphere of society.

So what is the problem then? It is the secular dedication to play instead of thriving for the highest good, which is God. The secular dedication can thereby be seen as lavishness and waste. It is not only the case that athletes are demonstrating god-like behavior in sports but sports even become a replacement for God. Therefore a conflict with the first commandment arises, which says that you should not have any other gods next to God. Thus it is not the development of sports nowadays, but the actual core of sports, which is problematic. Due to different moral key aspects, the church and sports cannot be combined very well. The only way to combine them according to Gldenpfennig (2000) is when you are Christian and an athlete at the same time. Gldenpfennig argues that

neither ethics used in sports can help out a Christian, who is not an athlete, when he/she has problems, nor can the ethics of religion help out a non-Christian athlete when he is in trouble. Therefore the conclusion is that it is important to criticize sports, but it does not work if it is done by the church. The churches do not have enough influence on sports to be able to criticize the system.

Besides, Güldenpfennig (2000) argues that although one might think it is an enrichment and a humanization for sports when the church tries to commit itself to developing the ethical principles of sports with the help of their basic understanding of human mankind and the message that the religious ethos is able to give deeper moral guidelines and more convincing reason to do sports, it is important to keep in mind that religion is not equal with morals. When people usually think of religion, they think of higher moral guidelines, but those have not always been lived up to by the church, since it has not always made good ethical decisions.

Something else, which makes it quite difficult to compare ethics of Christianity with ethics of sports and ethics of the profane world in general can be described very well with the following statement by Hoffman (1992b). He says that it is difficult to separate ethical views based on religion from those “representing an amalgam of religious and secular beliefs” (Hoffman, 1992b, p. 218). Religion based ethics often lack the objective, secular and ethical analysis. Hoffman claims that “although beliefs provide a rational basis for the moral act, it is faith that provides the motivation to act” (p. 218).

Not only Hoffman, but also Syed (2010) who published the newspaper article *The players with God on their Side* holds that view. He argues that it is the belief in general and not the truth of religion, which helps athletes being successful. So not what you believe in is important but the fact that you have something you believe in. This is what gives you stability in life. An example he mentions in this context is world triple jump record holder Jonathan Edwards who once said that faith was pivotal to his success, but is now an atheist. Another example is Muhammad Ali who said that Allah was the cornerstone of his success. So we see that the type of religious belief does not seem to matter. It does not seem to matter whether the belief of an athlete is Christian or Islamic. Faith is what is important and it is less a matter of theology than psychology.

Sports and Religion: A Bad Combination. The opinions about the relationship between sports and religion are constantly changing. There are different views on the existing relationship, or how the two relate to each other. The reasons why most people rather argue against the combination of sports and religion go beyond Güldenpfennig’s arguments and are explained in the following.

As Coakley (1986a) argues there are a lot of crucial differences between sports and religion, which makes it difficult for the two areas of life to be combined. First of all sports are competitive and individualistic, whereas religion is non competitive and communal. Besides, sports are instrumental and goal orientated, whereas religion is expressive and process orientated. Sports are part of the secular, material, profane world, whereas religion is part of the sacred and the supernatural. Beliefs of sports are diversified and related to everyday life whereas beliefs of religion are commonly held and related to the sacred. Sports are clear-cut and crude whereas religion is mystical and pure. Higgs (1992, p. 91) adds that “sports belong to the realm of the beautiful and play to the world of nature, but neither to the holy”, whereas religion partakes of the spiritual sublime, it is holy. These are the differences, which need to be mentioned.

Lay (1993) agrees to all this. In her opinion sports and religion are incompatible. The argument she adds is that since sports is concerned with competition, so with beating someone, competitive sports bring out the raw edge of emotion more than anything else. She therefore agrees with Boxill's thesis (2003b, p. 107) that “the intrinsic nature of competition is immoral [because competition itself is selfish, egoistic and] involves treating others as means, as enemies to be defeated, or as obstacles thwarting one's victory or success, to be removed by any means possible”.

In contrary to that, religion is concerned with loving everyone, humbleness, selflessness, the 10 Commandments, etc. In mentioning the fact that both, sports and religion, are very difficult to define, Lay (2003) also emphasizes the difficulty to actually judge and answer the question if you can combine the two.

Sports and Religion: A Good Combination. Since it is, according to Lay (2003), not that easy to define sports and religion, it is not very surprising that some authors do not share her point of view, but argue for a combination of sports and religion instead. A very extreme view by Prebish (1984), to which Coakley (1986a) refers, is for example that sports are religion because like religion, sports “can bring its advocates to an experience of the ultimate” (Coakley, 1986a, p. 318).

Other critics are not as extreme and just argue that since there are several similarities between the two, they can be combined. They claim that sport is religion-like, because both are “grounded on the same natural impulses that give rise to religion in society” (Coakley, 1986a, p. 319). Both emphasize asceticism, both set certain times as special, both have rituals, both have heroes and legends, both have places and buildings for communal gatherings, both have procedures and dramas linked to them, both have an institutionalized organizational structure.

But not only because sports are religion-like, can the two be easily combined according to some authors. According to Sternberg (2003), Syed (2010), but also Coakley (1986a), religion can also provide a psychological support for religious athletes. That means that the religious belief can be used by athletes to cope with uncertainties and to sanctify their own achievements within sports.

That is also the direction in which Sternberg (2003) is heading for in his article *Neutestamentliche Sportbilder und die christliche Wertschätzung der Leiblichkeit* (English translation: “New Testament Views on Sports and the Christian Appreciation of Corporeality”). He especially refers to statements made by *Sportler ruft Sportler* (SRS), a German Christian sports organization. They share the view that the stronger an athlete believes in Christian values, the better he or she is in sports. As soon as an athlete believes in God, it is easier for him to compete in many ways. According to SRS, Christian athletes have advantages in sports because God helps them to cope with loss, disappointment, defeat and so on in situations where they have not expected them at all. On the other side God prevents one from becoming arrogant and from putting too much importance on winning when someone has achieved a great wow. God helps athletes to realize that success is not everything in life. Faith therefore disburdens Christian athletes from the pressure of having to win and from defining oneself’s worth through winning in sports.

Christian Athletes in Competitive Sports. The stronger an athlete believes in the Christian values, the better he or she is in sports. Is this claim, which was made by SRS, really true? As we can state, sports and religion differ from each other in many basic characteristics. Therefore one might be able to imagine very easily the many conflicts Christian athletes could be faced with in sports. Is faith in God enough to overcome all these discrepancies and to even become a better sportsman? How can religious or Christian athletes handle the differences between sports and religion when doing sports?

To cite Hoffman (1992b, p. 216) again “athletes enjoy a remarkable range of freedom to act unethically within the framework of the rules”. When the moral conduct of a player is lower than the one set up by the game, he probably competes unfairly and often violates the rules. The more experience one thereby has in competitive sports, the more one adopts the ethical code of sports. But when the moral beliefs of an athlete are higher than the ones found in sports he might have to refrain from participating. And that is exactly what we expect to happen with religious or Christian athletes, especially in contact sports or sports that stand in the middle of attention, where lots of money is involved and so on.

So is that the case? Do Christian athletes refrain from participating? Or do they actually try to live up to their ideals and try to make sports a better sport? Do their religious beliefs serve as sacred guidelines? Or does their performance become tied to the moral worth of some of their opponents, which is guided by self-interest and social custom? Are their decisions in sports also made on an ad hoc basis and thus show only little evidence for consistency?

When you listen to Christian athletes, the one thing, which is mentioned over and over again is that they try to use their athletic talent, which is given to them by God, as good as possible. Doing sports or participating in sports should mainly be done to honor God. Vince Lombardi, a very famous and also religious football coach, once said: “When we don’t use our abilities to the fullest, we are not only cheating ourselves and the [team], we’re cheating the Lord” (Coakley, 1986a, p. 54). So what does that mean for Christian athletes? Is it true that Christian athletes have the tendency to consider it as the “ethical responsibility to play as intensely as possible without viewing sport or their performance in terms of the broader social and moral context” (Hoffman, 1992b, p. 219) – true to the maxim “whatever your task, work heartily, as serving the Lord and not man” (reference to Colossians, 3:23).

The impression we get is that the athlete just tries to escape the conflict in saying “God expects me to obey to him” (Coakley, 1986a, p. 54), God is our “Master Coach” and therefore we also have to obey our coach, otherwise we will get into trouble, as people who did not obey God. So the words of the coach are turned into a commandment of God.

Because of that it seems as if the playing style of Christian athletes does not seem to be affected much. Instead of trying to change sports through their religious beliefs and morals, they rather seem to choose to live the paradox. The only situation, which seems to create a real problem, is when game outcomes are used as symbols for good performance, when winning becomes the sacred and ultimate thing, and when losing raises questions about moral worth. Success in sports should therefore never turn into ones main gratification in life, because that would definitely contradict the ethics of religion.

The hope that Christian athletes might improve the moral situation of competitive sports nowadays has thus not been proved yet. Coakley (1986a) also writes in his article *Sport and religion, is it a promising combination?* about the influences that sports and religion can have on each other. Can religion change sports? Can sports change religion?

Coakley (1986a) argues that since the two are very different, the logical consequence is that there are changes in either of them if they are combined. But usually religion in sports does not change sports, which means that it does not lead to improving violence and cheating in professional sports. Religion is only able to use sports, find new members, use its members to represent religion and so on.

But Coakley (1986a) claims instead that religion is changed through sports. In his opinion it becomes secularized in order to fit the secular and the material nature of sports and the competitive character of sports as well. Because of this it seems as if religion is often used and also misused as the uncertainty of sports increase. It is transformed into magic. People start to pray for success, which is immoral and hypocritical because religious rituals have never intended to achieve material goals.

Empirical Approaches

The amount of empirical studies existing in the field of sports and religion is rather small. Kelly, Hoffman, and Gill's *The relationship between competitive orientation and religious orientation* (1990), Beller et al.'s *The Relationship of Competition and a Christian Liberal Arts Education on Moral Reasoning of College Student Athletes* (1995), and Conrad and Lau's study *Einfluss religiöser Einstellungen von Athletinnen und Athleten auf ihr leistungssportliches Leben* (English translation: "Effects of Athletes' Religious Attitudes on their Life in Competitive Sports") (2010) are some of the very few studies that exist and that will be used as a reference in this study.

Kelly et al. (1990) examined the relationship between competitive orientation and religious orientation. The athletes were asked why they were competing in sports. Three answers were thereby possible. The first answer was competitiveness, the second answer was goal orientation, and the third answer was outcome or success orientation. The result of the study was that an intrinsic religious orientation, meaning one that valued religion without regard for its usefulness, was associated more closely with competitive and goal orientation than with other orientations, while precisely the opposite effect was observed for students with extrinsic religious orientations. Furthermore, stepwise regression analysis showed athletic experience and extrinsic orientation to be the strongest predictors of a success orientation, whereas the strength of belief in traditional Christian doctrines was a major predictor of the adoption of a goal orientation.

Although the trend in this study was not strong, empirical data might suggest that what people believe religiously may affect how they think about sports and ultimately how they may conduct themselves in sports situations.

The study of Beller et al. (1995) is called *The Relationship of Competition and a Christian Liberal Arts Education on Moral Reasoning of College Student Athletes* and examined whether religious education courses affect moral reasoning about competition among athletes and non athletes. The expectation was that individuals were able to generalize these teaching to their personal, social and competitive lives through religious studies.

The result of their study was that non-athletes scored significantly higher than athletes, athletes of individual sports scored significantly higher than athletes of team sports, and women scored higher than men. But the study did not examine and therefore cannot answer if moral reasoning of women changes over time when doing sports as well. Another result was that problems with moral reasoning mainly occur in division 1 sports. But that negative effects of sports on moral reasoning can be found in all levels of sport when you compare moral reasoning to the one of non-athletic peers.

The important bottom line which was drawn from this study was that competition itself is neither good nor bad, but that it is the emphasize we put on winning that negatively effects moral reasoning and moral development

The study of Conrad and Lau (2010) examined the influence religious beliefs have on the way religious athletes compete in sports. How do religious athletes use their faith to accomplish certain tasks in competitive sports? Is there a difference between religious athletes and non-religious athletes? To answer these questions, Conrad and Lau did some quantitative and qualitative research. The quantitative research method consisted of a questionnaire, which was sent to 98 athletes in total. The athletes were active on different competitive levels in various sports. The qualitative research method consisted of a phone-interview, which was based on guiding questions, and which was carried out with twelve athletes in total. The results of the research were first of all that there is no significant difference between the way religious and non-religious athletes are competing. That is why Conrad and Lau combined the group of the “non-religious athletes” and “religious athletes” into the group of the “not very religious athletes”. The result was that very religious athletes disapprove of superstition while not very religious athletes agree to it. Besides, very religious athletes get their power and strength to compete from their faith in God, while not very religious athletes get it from their coach, teammates, friends, and also from the practice itself. Very religious athletes said that sports are prior to anything, such as the community, family and friends, while not very religious athletes said that all the things just mentioned had about the same priority in their lives. Very religious athletes also said that they live their faith in God in public, which means that they wear “Jesus T-Shirts”, “make a cross” while doing sports, speak about their belief in public,

while not very religious athletes strictly separate their beliefs from sports. The last difference Conrad and Lau found out was that the two groups of athletes had different characteristics in their personality disposition. While very religious athletes considered the value of honesty as most important, the other group preferred values such as perfectionism, time-management, having goals etc. Both groups had the same motive to do sports, which turned out to be fun. Besides, they agreed in their definition of goal, which is to always try to compete as best as they can.

Summarizing the results showed that Christian athletes differ from non-Christian athletes in aspects such as superstition, importance of sports, living ones faith and personality disposition, but that they have the same motives and goals.

Discussion and Conclusion

The intersection of religion, sports, morality, and ethics from the Christian athletes' perspective has not been a quantitatively well-researched area yet. Though there are some theoretical investigations that feature moral and ethical constraints of Christian athletes in competitive sports, there are only a few empirical studies to find. Hence, there is much open space to fill in terms of theoretical and empirical research.

Future research might design sophisticated empirical approaches to this under-researched field of study. There might be a point of contact in psychological approaches that have already developed concepts and instruments for "intrinsic religiosity" (Storch, Kolsky, Silvestri, & Storch, 2001; Storch, Storch, Kovacs, Okun, & Welsh, 2003). Research on values and beliefs of Christian athletes in competitive sports could adapt such concepts and develop specific instruments, therefore using psychological methodology.

Changing perspectives to different focus groups, settings, and religions might also lead to a fruitful further insight. For instance Bennett, Sagas, Fleming, and von Roenn (2005) focused on the Christian coach's view. Kahan (2011) presented a concept to help physical education teachers to deal with their students' religious beliefs and gives hints how to integrate religious and ethical values in physical education. Among other religions only small research pieces for Islam (Benn, Dagkas, & Jawad, 2011) and Judaism (Kahan, 2005) can be found. Thus, the study of various religions should be fostered to benefit from the particular religious perspective.

Nonetheless, research on the relationship between culture, society, sports, and values (Eitzen & Sage, 1989b; Garratt, 2010; Higgs, 1995; Hoffman, 1999)

should not be disregarded. Findings from such a macro-perspective might reveal applicable methods and theories. For instance Schroeder and Scribner (2006) investigated the particular area of intercollegiate athletics culture. Their findings might be applied to other areas and might serve as an initial point for further discussions. Even investigating the Olympic Games might therefore be initial for this purpose (Baker, 2000b).

In sum, we collected the traceable (theoretical and empirical) research on Christian athletes' (moral and ethical) values, what might hopefully be used for future research in this field of study.

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