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College Basketball in Kentucky, Religion, and Distinguishing Between the Two: Concerns and Cautions for the Conversation on the Religiosity of Sports

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COLLEGE BASKETBALL IN KENTUCKY, RELIGION, AND DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN THE TWO: CONCERNS AND CAUTIONS FOR THE CONVERSATION ON THE RELIGIOSITY OF SPORTS

A Thesis
Presented to
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Master of Arts

By
Matthew A. Sheffield

May 2015
COLLEGE BASKETBALL IN KENTUCKY, RELIGION, AND DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN THE TWO: CONCERNS AND CAUTIONS FOR THE CONVERSATION ON THE RELIGIOSITY OF SPORTS

Date Recommended April 13, 2015

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I dedicate this thesis to my friends and family, for their constant support and inspiration.
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COLLEGE BASKETBALL IN KENTUCKY, RELIGION, AND DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN THE TWO: CONCERNS AND CAUTIONS FOR THE CONVERSATION ON THE RELIGIOSITY OF SPORTS

Matthew A. Sheffield                           May 2015                           85 Pages

Directed by: Eric Bain-Selbo, Paul Fischer, and Frederick Grieve

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Academic analysis of sport and religion is still in an early and formative phase. Only in the past fifty years has the conversation of sport and religion substantially been revealed as subject matter for serious academic work. This thesis includes literature from various scholars interested in religion and sport, contemplation on the religious nature of college basketball in the state of Kentucky, and challenges for leading scholars arguing over the notion of sport as a form of religion. The first half of the thesis presents the narrative of the increasingly growing academic debate over considering sport a religious phenomenon. The latter half includes analysis of college basketball in Kentucky and my conclusions concerning the viability of the notion of a religion of sport. All the text is chiefly inspired by—and constructed in relation to—the approach of scholars reviewed earlier in the thesis.

This text provides readers with a sense of various arguments on both sides of the discussion of the religion of sport. Secondly, the work encourages consideration of new alternative approaches to discussing sport and religion. This work is intended to provide a challenge to the rigid nature of previous scholarship on this subject. Demonstrating the relative utility of college basketball in Kentucky, through revealing its usefulness to both groups of scholars divided on this question of the religion of sport, proves to be instrumental in exemplifying the complexities within this scholarly debate. This case
study also proves to be crucial for legitimizing the suggestions for alternative approaches to sport and religion that are raised within this text. Elsewhere, by emphasizing the significance of definitions of religion, evaluating the utility of the comparability of any observable phenomenon, and emphasizing the diversity among approaches to sport and religion, this text encourages the development of new approaches to research, increased self-criticism, and willingness to extend charity among scholars interested in debating sport as a religious phenomenon.
Introduction

My mother is the youngest of four children. Her three older brothers grew up playing sports and she was the cheerleader in the family. For my entire family, various sports have been a consistent element of life. Whether playing, spectating, cheering, or coaching, at some point all of us have done one or more of these. But beyond all the influences that sport has had on our family, one sport—more precisely one team within one sport—has stood unequalled in significance.

My indoctrination started at birth. Before I was able to walk I was taught to prefer the color blue over the color red. Long before I knew what a basketball was I often aimlessly moved around the numerous baby-sized basketballs I was given. At a very early age, I knew that being able to dribble with either hand was a desirable skill. Many of my earliest memories of friends and family are commonly shaded in Kentucky Wildcat blue. Growing up, I was taught that Kentucky Wildcat basketball was life, and in the late 1990s, life was good.

Our beloved Wildcats made three consecutive trips to the championship game from 1996-1998. Winning two of three of those title games, I can remember the wide range of emotions accompanying both the thrill of Kentucky victories and the heartache in their defeats. Beyond the team’s on court success or failure, I also witnessed grown men and women within my family being positively or negatively affected by these games. I considered it normal to become agitated when Kentucky lost, and I thought it surely must be commonplace to celebrate joyously over the team’s wins. Later in life, I found it very strange that everyone did not share this same perspective on sports.

I became interested in the study of religion during my undergraduate years at Western
Kentucky University (WKU). After double majoring in religious studies and philosophy I was excited to further pursue my interest in religion by joining the graduate program in religious studies at WKU. It was on the campus of WKU that I met Dr. Eric Bain-Selbo, a professor and the department head of philosophy and religion. I was surprised to hear that he recently had written a book about college football and religion. I was previously unaware that academic work on the topic of sport and religion existed. Being a sports enthusiast, my interests were piqued at the possibility of combining my interest in religion with my life long love for sports.

This thesis is the product of that very collision, an academic marriage of sport and religion for better or worse. More precisely, this text seeks to deliver on two fronts. First, I hope to provide an answer as to whether or not college basketball in the state of Kentucky could be considered religious. And second, I hope to provide cautions and express concerns about previous and current scholarship on religion and sport.

The following chapters include literature from various scholars interested in religion and sport, contemplation on the religious nature of college basketball in the state of Kentucky, and challenges for scholars arguing over the notion that sport could be considered a form of religion. The first part of the thesis will present a narrative of the growing academic debate over whether or not sport is a form of religion. The latter half includes analysis of college basketball in Kentucky and my conclusions concerning the viability of the religion of sport, which is chiefly inspired by—and constructed in response to—the approach of scholars reviewed earlier in the thesis.

The first chapter is a presentation of key points from writers who argue that sport is in some way a religious phenomenon. Simultaneously the chapter is intentionally presented
in a manner that should bring clarity to the evolution of this academic conversation. This section includes arguments from Michael Novak, Charles S. Prebish, Joseph L. Price, Randolph Feezell, and Eric Bain-Selbo. The inclusion of this chapter is intended to provide insight into literature pertaining to the argument for consideration of sport as religion. It also should show how these authors have contributed to the transitioning of the discussion of sport and religion from the arena of mere musings to serious academic argument.

The next chapter is a presentation of key points from authors who resist the notion that sport constitutes a religion. Similar to the first chapter, the format of the text is designed to reflect the dialogue between scholars from the first chapter and those resisting the case for a religion of sport. This section includes arguments from a short work by Joan Chandler, a co-authored text from Robert J. Higgs and Michael C. Braswell, and a co-edited anthology from Tara Magdalinski and Timothy J. L. Chandler. This chapter is intended to parallel the first chapter by providing examples of voices opposing arguments for the religion of sports. Taken together, these first two chapters should provide a general synopsis of key movements in the relatively young academic debate over the religiousness of sport.

In the third chapter, drawing both inspiration and instruction from the arguments made by authors reviewed in the first two chapters, I address the specific case of college basketball in the state of Kentucky. First, I provide information on the unique relationship between Kentucky and the game of basketball. Then, I utilize the approaches of writers from chapter one to test the applicability of their arguments to college basketball in Kentucky. This is followed by a similar application of arguments from chapter two,
which is intended to examine the strengths of such challenges to any notion that basketball in Kentucky is a religion. This approach is intentionally utilized to allow reflection on arguments reviewed earlier, but the third chapter is primarily focused on analyzing the case of college basketball in Kentucky. Conclusive remarks as to the success or failure of the establishment or rejection of this sport as a religion are withheld until the final chapter.

Finally, in the fourth chapter I provide a concluding analysis on each of the previous sections of the thesis. This conclusion includes responses to the arguments made in chapters one and two, as well as the conclusion of my argument pertaining to the religiousness of college basketball in Kentucky. Each aspect of this final chapter is interconnected, as my response to the writers reviewed in the thesis corresponds with my argument concerning college basketball in Kentucky. In this section I challenge the utility of the rigid nature of the scholarship on this subject. By emphasizing the significant role of definitions of religion, evaluating the utility of the comparability of any observable phenomenon, and emphasizing the diversity among approaches to sport and religion, I intend to encourage the development of increased self-criticism and willingness to extend charity among scholars interested in debating sport as religion. Demonstrating the relative utility of college basketball in Kentucky, through revealing its usefulness to both groups of scholars divided on this question of the religion of sport, proves instrumental in exemplifying the complexities within this scholarly debate as well as for the purposes of legitimizing the suggestions I raise for alternative approaches to discussing sport and religion.
This chapter is followed by a short conclusion in which I discuss further my suggestions for future academic conversation on sport and religion. In sum, I hope that this thesis provides readers with a sense of the type of arguments being made by individuals on both sides of this discussion about the viability of the religion of sport. Secondly, I hope to encourage consideration of new alternative approaches to the dilemma of how to discuss sport and religion. As I will demonstrate throughout this text, my challenges to scholars entrenched on both sides of this discussion are intended to inspire and provide constructive suggestions for future work in this area. As for the merit of my contribution to the serious academic work being done in this area, the reader will have to decide. If the work within these pages provides reflective pause to any reader who has ever pondered the religiosity of sports, I consider this the realization of at least one of my primary aims.
Chapter One – Considering Arguments that Sport Constitutes a Type of Religion

Academic work concerned with sport and religion is a relatively new area of study. Only in the past fifty years has serious academic work in the study of the relationship between sport and religion become increasingly widespread. More narrowly, the debate over understanding sport as a religious phenomenon is even younger. This text begins by providing a review of the most substantive academic work on the subject to date. Crucial to understanding this conversation is the process of identifying that which is being argued for, or protected, when it comes to the debate over the plausibility and utility of understanding sport as religion.

In other words, it is important to clarify what is really at stake for scholars on both side of this discussion. Navigating key arguments, as well as the motivations and aims, of thinkers on both sides of this conversation helps to conceptualize the origin, evolution, utility, and trajectory of this scholarly discussion. I first provide a literary review of writers who have argued that sport is indeed in some way religious. Readers who come across these works on the religion of sport can easily observe the seriousness with which these authors approach the topic of sport. Where sport was once the stuff of hobby settled quaintly within an arena for mere musings considered less than seriously academic, these authors stand as a testimony to the widespread increase of academic interest and scholarly validation of the serious study of sport.

Michael Novak on The Joy of Sports

In his book *The Joy of Sports: Endzones, Bases, Baskets, Balls, and the Consecration of the American Spirit*, Michael Novak attempts to explain the religious nature of
American sports. Originally publishing *The Joy of Sports* in 1967, Novak’s arguments have been echoed by many thinkers who followed in his pursuit of communicating the religious nature of sport. Novak’s work in *The Joy of Sports* expands upon much of Mircea Eliade’s work, which I will address below, proposing that the conceptions we have of the sacred can also apply to contemporary American sports. Of his inspiration to write this book *The Joy of Sports*, Novak reflects on his childhood when his family lived a short trolley ride from the Forbes Field. As he reflects, “I could see the Dodgers. How proud I was when they hired Jackie Robinson. The Dodgers meant not only victory to me and heartbreak, but goodness; they were a cut above ordinary human life.”¹ Later in his life, turning forty in 1973, Novak was far removed from his childhood self and the now Los Angeles Dodgers. He writes:

> It is early September, my birthday is half a week away. The Scotch is swaying restlessly in my paper cup. Suddenly, I remember. Monday night: television. The Dodgers are at Montreal. My spirits lift. Tonight there is a treat. That hot September night, the Dodgers lost. I was three days shy of forty, and their loss depressed me…How could I be forty years old and still care what happens to the Dodgers?²

Here Novak is describing the perplexing nature of his reaction to a baseball game. He sat pondering the reason why he spent three hours of his life watching a game. All of these feelings lead him to the following two questions: “Is it time for sports to be discarded? Is it time to put away the things of childhood?”³ Novak says that this moment brought about a sense of clarity and feeling of obligation to investigate sports and write what would eventually become *The Joy of Sports*. After questioning whether or not to discard sports Novak writes:

> Quietly, I knew the answer. What I had just seen was somehow more important than my other work, was deeper in my being than most of what I did, spoke to me of beauty, excellence, imagination, and animal
vitality—was true in a way few things in life are true. My love for sports was deeper than any theory that I had. The reality is better than its intellectual defense. So I knew I had an obligation to work on this book.4

While admitting that religion is extremely diverse in nature, Novak argues that some characteristics of religion can be enumerated—of which he clearly establishes seven elements of religion. He toils to provide a definition of religion for the purposes of demonstrating the commonalities, or shared phenomenon, between religion and sport. First of all, he claims that a religion is “organized and structured.”5 He argues that clearly identifiable within such organization are very serious ceremonies and customs out of which “right ways and wrong ways are plainly marked out; illicit behaviors are distinguished from licit ones.”6

Second, Novak claims that “religions are built upon ascesis…the development of character, through patterns of self-denial, repetition, and experiment.”7 Furthermore, he claims that this character is often closely tied to—and chiefly informed by—the unconscious needs of the society. Novak adds that rituals function with a revelatory quality as they dramatize otherwise unspoken qualities central to the group. Third, the author claims that religions rely on channeling human feelings associated with “danger, contingency, and chance” further arguing that “religions place us in the presence of powers greater than ourselves, and seek to reconcile us to them.”8

Fourth, Novak argues that religions hold a loyalty to local belonging. He argues that religions “normally begin by blessing the local turf, the local tribe, and the local instinct of belonging—and use these as paradigms for the development of larger loyalties.”9 Fifth, he states that religions consecrate and celebrate specific time as sacred time. Novak argues that such sacred time is “lifted out of everyday normal routines, a time that is
different, in which different laws apply, a time within which one forgets ordinary time.”

Sixth, similar to his comments on *ascesis*, he argues that in order to have a religion “you need to have heroic forms to try to live up to: patterns of excellence so high that human beings live up to them only rarely.” Also, Novak argues that in order to have a religion “you need to have patterns of symbols and myths that a person can grow old with, with a kind of resignation, wisdom and illumination.” These arguments here stress that the combination of “patterns of excellence” and “patterns of symbols and myths” is crucial to the sustainability of a particular religion over time—and particularly useful in addressing experiences of aging and death.

Lastly, Novak claims that in order to have a religion “you need to have a way to exhilarate the human body, and desire, and will, and the sense of beauty, and a sense of oneness with the universe and other humans.” For Novak, this banner, song, battle cry, or whatever else might inspire group solidarity is key for religious experience. And of all of these previous seven claims he makes about religion, Novak argues “all these things you have in sports.” Throughout the book *The Joy of Sports*, Novak defends the religious nature of sport. For the purposes of this research, it is worth reviewing two key elements of what he calls the “seven seals” which “lock the inner life of sports.”

Novak’s seven seals function to reveal the religious nature of key aspects of sport, group solidarity within sport, experiences of both participants and spectators, and the elements of struggle and competition within sport. I will focus only on his first two seals at this time, because these are commonly emphasized by others who defend the notion that sport constitutes something that is religious in nature. Novak’s first two seals are sacred space and sacred time. These concepts are commonly referenced by religious
studies scholars along with those who have argued that sport has a religious character.

On sacred space in sports, Novak writes:

There is a special awe that arises when one enters for the first time—or anytime—one’s high school gym, or Madison Square Garden, or Pauley Pavilion, or wherever the symbolic center of achievement may be…The athlete needs to internalize the ambiance, to dig his cleats in the turf, to root his senses and instincts there, to bounce the ball experimentally on the floor, to learn by sixth sense the slightest fixtures, signs, and contours of the place. Baseball, basketball, and football do not take place just anywhere. These are consecrated places…Sports arenas are storied places. Universes of tales.¹⁶

The notion of sacred space that Novak is putting forth is a space that is set apart from ordinary space. He argues that in all aspects of life these sacred places can be found to have been lifted up for numerous reasons. Most commonly, he asserts the spaces are where “great deeds have been done.”¹⁷ Of arenas and stadiums in sport, Novak argues that these places are the “monasteries” and “cathedrals” of the religion of sport.¹⁸

As previously mentioned, Novak presents sacred time as set apart from everyday normal time where different laws apply, and in which persons can actually sometimes forget ordinary time. Of sacred time in sports, Novak writes:

A feature of sacred time is its emphasis on life and possibility. As long as there are seconds on the clock, anything can happen; maximal efforts may be crowned with success. Athletes probe the forces and the sources of life, press against them, court them to their uttermost…Sacred time is sacred because it stores up possibilities of the heroic; so long as sacred time exists, the heroic is in incubation. Sacred time teaches humans to never quit, to count upon and entrust themselves to the potencies of life, redemption, beauty…In the sacred time of sports, the time of heroes occasionally breaks through.¹⁹

Novak argues that the concepts of sacred space and sacred time—along with many other traditionally religious concepts—are central to sports. Furthermore, he claims it should be understood that sport functions as a sort of religion. He argues that “religion is
the intensity of the human spirit in its deepest and most general form. It finds many
outlets and expressions.” While intensity and passion are easily observable in the world
of sports, Novak repeatedly asserts that sport engages both participants and spectators in
something beyond the here and now. He argues:

Sports are carriers of traditions, of rituals. They war against traditionless
modernity. They satisfy the most persistent hungers of the human heart—
for repetition (how many cocktail parties have you attended? How many
dinners?) and for solemn ritual, for pageantry and for uncertain outcomes.
For centuries, human beings have gathered so. Sports are our brotherhood
with ancient and medieval times. Sports are religions of place, of
particulars, of deeds done here and at a concrete hour.

Writing in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Novak senses a gap in the study of civil
religions. His inspiration can be described as developing out of the negative or lack of
emphasis on sports in the conversation of civil religions. His work in The Joy of Sports
seems equally personal and professional, purposely walking this line for the purposes of
bridging the gap of leisure interest in sport and more serious academic work. As he
explains this new endeavor of understanding the religious nature of sports:

Faith in sports, I have discovered, seeks understanding. I cannot forever
split my life in two, half in love with sports, half in love with serious
thought. Life seeks unity. This book is an attempt by a believer to explore
his belief, to find some useful words for it, to give his head reasons for
what his heart already knows... All around this land there is a faith without
an explanation, a love without a rationale. This book is written to fill a
void among the faithful.

It becomes clear in the introductory pages of his book that Novak understands his
work as an exploratory pursuit that seeks to establish a serious academic conversation
about the religion of sports. Motivated—and uncomfortable with being split at points—
by both his personal and professional interests, the book consistently reflects the struggle
and ultimate goal of validating the serious academic conversation of sport. What is at
stake for Novak? Why write *The Joy of Sports*? Quite simply, his work is born out of a need to address what he perceived as oversight amongst thinkers who have written about civil religion, as he understands that they have omitted, forgotten, or marginalized the worth of studying the civil religion of sports. Michael Novak’s work stands as a unique contribution to the conversation on religion and sport as his book has helped to inspire or usher in a new approach to the study of sport and religion. Novak is one of the earliest of now many voices within academia who have written extensively on the subject of sport as a form of religion.

Charles Prebish on Religion and Sport

Like Novak, Charles Prebish similarly found inspiration to write his book *Religion and Sport: The Meeting of Sacred and Profane* due to a perceived gap in the literature on religion and sport. In the preface to his book Prebish writes, “there is no one volume that thoroughly addresses even a small portion of the vital considerations necessary to understand the complex relationship between religion and sport.” Prebish understands his text as fitting into a line of reasoning taken by other authors, but also that his conclusions are quite obvious and have yet to be sufficiently enunciated. While he nods to the contributions of Michael Novak—to the point of utilizing a chapter from Novak in his anthology—Prebish expresses some dissatisfaction with what he perceives as Novak’s inability to bring about a full sense of closure on the relationship of sport and religion. Of his criticism of Novak, Prebish writes:

> It is quite perplexing, then, that Novak says, “A sport is not a religion in the same way that Methodism, Presbyterianism, or Catholicism is a religion. But these are not the only kinds of religion. There are secular religions, civil religions.” Novak seems to be indicating that sport
functions as a civil religion in the United States. However, we must rule out that notion after reading, several pages later, that “sports are not Christianity, or Judaism, or Islam, or Buddhism, or any other of the world’s religions. Sports are not the civil religion of the United States of America, or Great Britain, or Germany, or the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, or Ghana, or any other nation.” When he says, on the very next line, “But sports are a form of religion,” my patience breaks down again.24

Of note here, beyond the frustration with Novak’s work, is how Prebish mentions that his “patience breaks down again.”25 This is in reference to his frustrations with Harry Edward’s earlier book Sociology of Sport. Published in 1973, Edward’s Sociology of Sport states: “If there is a universal popular religion in America it is to be found within the institution of sport.”26 Yet, Edwards continues on to provide conclusions on sport and religion that leave Prebish unsettled. Prebish writes:

What I find overwhelmingly hard to understand is why Professor Edwards says that “in sum, sport is essentially a secular, quasi-religious institution. It does not, however, constitute an alternative to or substitute for formal sacred religious involvement.”27 It is apparent that Edwards sees, or at least presents, far more material on the subject than his colleagues in any of the sub-disciplines of sport study. Yet, he too, like all other writers, insists on stopping short of what is becoming notably obvious.28

In the last line of this excerpt Prebish makes some telling statements. He says that Edwards and “all other writers,” presumably those writing about sport and religion, are “stopping short” of coming to a sufficient close on the relationship between sport and religion. Even though he is writing almost a couple decades removed from Novak and Edwards, Prebish communicates a persisting gap in the literature on sport and religion—a gap that he often refers to as the obvious conclusion that has yet to be drawn. To this point he claims:

For me, it is not just a parallel that is emerging between religion and sport, but rather a complete identity. Sport is a religion for growing numbers of Americans, and this is no product of simple facile reasoning or wishful thinking. Further, for many, sport religion has become a more appropriate
expression of personal religiosity than Christianity, Judaism, or any of the traditional religions.  

Prebish makes it clear that a key motivating factor for his work in *Religion and Sport: The Meeting of the Sacred and Profane* is to fill a void left behind by others interested in the relationship between sport and religion. He stresses the need to make explicitly clear the common identity shared by religion and sport. Repeatedly criticizing other authors for not completing this task. Prebish argues that while other authors have merely presumed that religion and sport share commonalities and vocabulary such as the words sacred, dedicated, and sacrifice, these authors have remained in positions that distinctly protect a variation of uses for these elements and terms in the separate cases of religion and sport. His argument clearly is aimed at explicitly communicating that sport and religion are more than similar, but that they are better understood as maintaining a shared identity. He claims that this is due to the notion that religion must be considered that which is sacred and sport is otherwise secular. To this point on shared but varied terminology, Prebish argues, “I would maintain, however, that in many cases there is absolutely no difference in the meaning that each term carries for the two traditions in question.”

What is at stake for Prebish? Why does he contribute to this conversation? In short, his dissatisfaction with the inability or unwillingness of other authors to explicitly declare and enunciate the reality of sport as religion. For Prebish, the time for wavering and stopping short of the obvious had come.

**Joseph L. Price on Sports as American Religion**

In the book *From Season to Season: Sports as American Religion*, a collection of essays edited by Joseph L. Price, the influence of both Mircea Eliade and Michael Novak
is on display. Price’s anthology falls as the next logical step in the progression of substantive texts on sport as religion. While nodding to the contributions of thinkers who have written about the subject, Price understands *From Season to Season* as fulfilling a specific task that others had left untouched. He writes, “Even though a number of the works cited thus far consider some of the religious dimensions or phenomena associated with sports in America, none of them develops an extended analysis of the American sporting scene in terms of a religious studies orientation.”

Addressing specifically the contributions of Michael Novak, Price claims, “he does not undertake a thorough analysis of why or how the sports themselves might be interpreted as religion.” And on Prebish’s work Price states, “For the most part, Prebish’s volume is devoted to foundational considerations about how sports can be understood as religious.” Price offers little criticism of the works from these authors outside of advancing the notion that each has yet to provide the sort of approach to specific cases of sports that his anthology seeks to provide. Of his work in *From Season to Season*, Price writes, “The orientation of the present volume is different from these earlier works in several respects, most significantly by focusing on specific sports and the ways in which they command or display distinct religious dimensions.” Price accompanies an increasingly growing population of scholars of religion that have begun to analyze religious components of contemporary American sport. In the introduction to *From Season to Season*, Price makes the following claim about sport:

> Throughout history, sports contests have been liminal occasions that operate in ritually defined space. They have transpired in a kind of time that is more akin to *kairos* than chronos. They have often commanded the dedication (often seemingly ultimate) of athletes and fans, and they have inspired the adulation of successful players and contestants. They have frequently appealed to the human interest for hope and renewal. And as
sportswriter Frank Deford suggested in the last decades of the twentieth century, sports have now become the opiate of American masses. Indeed in North America at the start of the twenty-first century, sports have become “a secular kind of faith.”

From Season to Season is a collection of essays, from Price and eight other scholars, which focuses on sport and religion. As the editor and main contributor, Price writes about many different sports. Price’s essay that proves most relevant is an essay titled “The Final Four as Final Judgment: The Cultural Significance of the NCAA Basketball Championship.” Throughout the essay Price draws numerous comparisons between the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Tournament and religious conceptions of final reward and judgment. The first comparison he draws is one dealing with initial selection of teams or process of invitation to the tournament. He writes:

According to religious expectations about the methods for securing final reward, there are two ways to acquire it: by merit and by grace. Similarly, there are two ways that teams begin the process of getting to the Final Four: by merit (winning conference championships or conference tournaments) and by grace (receiving an invitation that does not necessarily recognize teams with the best winning records). Of the sixty-four bids issued to teams for the 1988 NCAA Tournament, thirty were automatic while thirty-four were by invitation. Both grace and works, then, enable the prospect of selection for the Final Four.

Price’s aim in the article is to ask and answer questions about the significance of the NCAA Tournament as an event of judgment. Price understands the essay to speak equally to the culture of college basketball as it does to American popular culture at large. He concludes:

We can fairly say that the Final Four is a Final Judgment. By it we judge ourselves, while thinking that the players and coaches themselves are the ones under scrutiny; and it is final, not in the sense of coming at the end of time but in the sense of disclosing more nearly fully who we really are. Perhaps, like the Final Judgment anticipated by millenarian religions, it does not separate the sheep from the goats. But at least it allows the Orangemen and the Hoosiers, the Wildcats and the Sooners, or perhaps
some year the Duke Blue Devils and the Crusaders to vie for the preferred place at the right hand, not of God, but of the president.  

Price’s take on parallels between the “Final Four and Final Judgment” reveals much about his perspective on the religious nature of sport in general. His commentary on various sports repeatedly reveals the notion that many Americans utilize the narratives, characters, and general arena of sport as an avenue to express the highest or deepest concerns of the society. Like Novak before him, Price adamantly defends the religious nature of sport by repeatedly arguing that sport at least constitutes an American popular religion. He concludes *From Season to Season* with this emphatic claim of sports:

> They (sports) exercise a power for shaping and engaging the world for millions of devoted fans throughout America; they enable participants to explore levels of selfhood that otherwise remain inaccessible; they establish means for bonding in communal relations with other devotees; they model ways to deal with contingencies and fate while playing by the rules; and they provide the prospect for experiencing victory and thus sampling, at least in an anticipatory way, “abundant life.” In America, quite simply, sports constitute a form of popular religion.  

Price, like Novak and Prebish before him, finds inspiration for his specific work on sport as religion in perceived needs for the evolution of the conversation of sport as religion. What is at stake for Price? What drives his composition of *From Season to Season*? Compiling his anthology around the turn of the millennium, Price senses that almost three complete decades of work on sport as religion have yet to manifest a text that provides analysis of how various sports each “command or display religious dimensions.” His anthology seeks to provide such a resource.

**Randolph Feezell on the Appeal of Sport and Play**

In his book *Sport, Play, and Ethical Reflection*, Randolph Feezell speaks to the nature
of, and attraction to, sport. Randolph Feezell may seemingly not fit so nicely in this line of scholars writing on religion as sport, because Feezell is primarily a philosopher and an ethicist dealing most directly with ethical concerns pertaining to sport. His inclusion in this research is twofold; first, his publishing of this book is an example of the recent increased dialogue on sport across the disciplines, and second, he is relevant to the discussion of sport as religion due to the similarities between his commentary on play and sport with the sacred and profane language so commonly emphasized by those approaching sport in religious studies. Feezell communicates a common admission among this group of authors in the very first line of his book. He says:

This book is the product of two things: my lifelong interest and involvement in sports and a philosophical turn of mind…At one point in my life I was convinced the former, cultivated and developed in youth, had to give way to the latter, whose inchoate appearance blossomed as an undergraduate and seemed to trump my other interest as I entered graduate school.42

In his introduction to his book, Feezell makes reference to Michael Novak’s The Joy of Sports in which he writes, “Novak’s text reinforced the notion that one might unapologetically affirm the splendid qualities of sport and see in sports sources of meaning and represented qualities that bring to mind religious and aesthetic aspects of human existence.”43 Drawing inspiration from Novak and other recently emerging serious academic work on sport, Feezell applies his philosophical methods of analysis to demonstrate and enunciate many ethical questions that arise in sport. He openly discusses the possible risks and rewards surrounding the merit of his analysis of sport as he writes, “I also realized that many would not be able to appreciate my contributions to philosophy of sport, since the academic prejudice against the lack of seriousness and rigor of such philosophizing is apparent, and the athletic world is populated by few who would
appreciate my obscure reflections.”

While Feezell focuses primarily on addressing important ethical questions within sport, of particular interest for our study is Feezell’s commentary on the play theory of sport—that which appeals to those who engage in sport (the players)—and the aesthetic experience of sport—that which appeals to those who view sports (the fans). Developing a better understanding of how sport appeals to various individuals is key in understanding the possible religious role or influence sport can have on people. This analysis also helps to explain how the seemingly trivial arena of play can be understood as activity that blurs the lines between what is considered secular, religious, profane, and sacred. Feezell explains, “Play is a momentary reprieve from the burdens of ordinary or everyday life.”

Play offers human beings an opportunity to step out of everyday meanings and prescriptions, offering the participant an experience of an alternative world of sorts that maintains its own set of meanings and prescriptions. In this way, play offers a certain type of freedom for its participants. “The freedom of play suggests that we bracket out our ordinary and pressing concerns as we take a stance outside the practical affairs of life.” One can see the appeal that play has for those who engage in sport. As the element of play provides an opportunity for transcendence beyond the mundane world, it provides a “free projection of alternative possibilities.”

Though the play theory discussed by Feezell reveals various appeals of sport to players, it does not overwhelmingly provide explanations as to the appeal of those who simply view sport (spectators, fans, etc). While the sort of transcendent freedom that play offers to participants can be experienced by fans in a similar manner, Feezell argues that it is not clear that sport generally appeals to fans in the same way as the players. First, on
the experience of sports fans, Feezell claims that sport provides “intrinsically interesting experiences” that are in and of themselves of aesthetic value.\(^{48}\) Second, sport provides “narratives” and “contexts of meaning” that are of value in the individual’s search for meaning in life.\(^{49}\) On this aesthetic element, Feezell writes:

Consider the notion that one of the significant elements in the fan’s love of watching games like baseball, football, and basketball has something to do with the way in which sport structures experience and represents it to us…Perhaps the aesthetic element plays an important role in the fan’s love of the game. Furthermore, in certain kinds of aesthetic experiences we are captivated by our involvement in another temporally constructed world.\(^{50}\)

In either case, whether it is the freedom of play or the intrinsic beauty of sport, participants and spectators alike express attraction to, and experiences of, sport that are rich and qualitatively deep. Feezell explains that the phenomenon that is sport is not always easily understood by all observers. “As a spectator, it might be difficult to believe that the sweating, straining faces of pick-up basketball players express some deep sense of enjoyment and identification; but from the standpoint of the lived experiences of the players, there is little doubt about this point.”\(^{51}\)

What is at stake for Feezell? Sport must be demonstrated as being characterized by a level of complexity that is often assumed lacking from the phenomenon. As he states, “The view of sport that emerges in this book rejects any overly simple or reductive notion, especially any kind of purely instrumental view of sport…The problem is that we fail to take seriously the intrinsic value of such trivial activity.”\(^{52}\) The lines between secular and religious, and more precisely the profane and sacred, become increasingly blurred when identifiably religious elements appear in “secular” or “unreligious” contexts.
Eric Bain-Selbo on Football in the American South

Both a philosopher and religious studies scholar, our final contributor on the religion of sports is Eric Bain-Selbo. In his book, Game Day and God: Football, Faith, and Politics in the American South, Bain-Selbo immediately discusses his professional and personal interests colliding in the area of sport and religion. He addresses this in his preface by writing, “This book arose both from intellectual curiosity as a scholar and personal passion as a fan. I often had heard that college football in the South was a religion. So as a scholar of religion as well as a philosopher, I was curious about how true that assessment really was.”

Joseph Price provides high praise for Bain-Selbo as he contributes the forward for Game Day and God. Price writes “Bain-Selbo scores a victory in this impressive work, not only for appreciating the significance of Southern collegiate football but also for expanding our understanding of the dynamics of religion.” Price’s praise of Bain-Selbo’s work in the book should not come as a surprise considering it was Price that said of earlier writers, “Even though a number of the works cited thus far consider some of the religious dimensions or phenomena associated with sports in America, none of them develops an extended analysis of the American sporting scene in terms of a religious studies orientation.”

Bain-Selbo argues that concepts of the sacred persist in even the most secular individuals and unreligious societies. Bain-Selbo points out that even that which is deemed “secular” and “unreligious” is not immune to the pervasiveness of the human affinity for that which we might call “the sacred.” While focused primarily on college football in the American South, Bain-Selbo’s analysis on experiences of the sacred can be
understood as relevant to any discussion of concepts of the sacred both inside and out of the realm of traditional religion. He constructs many arguments in support for the consideration of the religious nature of college football in the American South, including stressing the pervasiveness of concepts of the sacred and the human affinity for religious experience. He writes:

The sacred may change and look very different from one epoch to another, from one culture to another. People may even fail to be fully conscious of the sacred and may fail to recognize their own religious behavior, but they remain inextricably drawn to what is sacred in the sense described—a desire to identify and associate with that which is “really real,” an orientation towards the transcendent, and a need for some sense of order—and thus are undeniably religious.56

What is at stake for Bain-Selbo? Why write a book on college football in the American South? Bain-Selbo’s analysis of football in the American South reads like an embrace of a challenge extended by Price. By providing extensive commentary of the “religion” of college football in the American South, Bain-Selbo, at the very least, is able to partially take up the task of filling the resource void Price had mentioned in his earlier text. Furthermore, Bain-Selbo utilizes his case of college football to support his argument that there is an accessibility to experiences of the sacred that occur outside of the realm of traditional religion. Beyond placing emphasis on the complex variety within concepts of the sacred as well as the human evolving relationship to these concepts, Bain-Selbo argues that his case study of college football in the American South reveals the sport to contain religious elements such as myths, legends, symbols, concepts of sacred space, concepts of sacred time, and ritual practice. He claims that these elements also function to create religious communities and provide adherents with religious experiences.
Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed work from individuals who have written not just about the similarities between sport and religion, but have gone a step further to argue that sport constitutes a form of religion. The goal has been to hear the voices of those who argue that when talking about sports we indeed are talking about something religious in nature.

In the final two chapters I will provide an extensive critique of all the theorists mentioned throughout this study. It suffices at this point to mention that I will challenge the consistency of the parallels drawn between religion and sport and analyze the utility of the definitions of religion used in the arguments that constitute sport as a religion.

All of these writers, from Novak to Bain-Selbo, have approached the topic of sport and religion, or sport as religion, from their own specific motivations and locations within the timeline of the academic conversation of sport. Common to all of these authors is the admitted interest in validating the academic conversation of sport and religion, or at least attempts at providing explanation for their interest in serious work on this subject. Each of these authors clearly state at some point that their serious academic research on sport has been inspired by a collision of their personal and professional lives. Their work is a testimony to the relatively new arena of serious academic work on sport. Their efforts have not gone unnoticed, as both proponents and detractors of the notion of the religion of sport have increasingly presented themselves, often working in close relation with these figures.

Notes

3 Ibid., xvi.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., 29.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid., 29-30.
9 Ibid., 30.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., 31.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., 129.
16 Ibid., 130-131.
17 Ibid., 132.
18 Ibid., 134.
19 Ibid., 137-138.
20 Ibid., 350.
21 Ibid., 133.
22 Ibid., xviii.
25 Ibid.
29 Ibid., 62.
30 Ibid., 63.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., 9.
37 Ibid., 172.
38 Ibid., 181.
39 Ibid., 229.
40 Ibid.
42 Feezell, *Sport, Play, and Ethical Reflection*, ix.
43 Ibid., xi.
44 Ibid., x-xi.
45 Ibid., 53.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid., 33.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid., 23.
52 Ibid, xiii.
56 Bain-Selbo, *Game Day and God*, 5.
Chapter Two – Considering Resistance to Sport as Religion

Some of the more substantial examples of resistance to the idea of sport as a religious phenomena that have been put forth are reviewed in the second chapter of this text. Highlighting some of the key aims and motivations of these writers is equally important to understanding the evolution and trajectory of the academic analysis of religion and sport. Each of the following authors maintain that sport does not constitute a religion. While sharing in common this overall resistance, each brings forth slightly different arguments that challenge the religiousness of sports in various ways.

Joan Chandler - Sport is Not a Religion

Situated in a larger anthology on religion and sport, Joan Chandler’s essay stands out with the not so subtle title “Sport is Not a Religion.” Chandler takes issue with ways in which thinkers such as Novak and Prebish argue on religion and sport. She claims that they have done a “disservice to both sport and religion.”1 She introduces her charges against the notion of sport as a religion as being in response to the ways in which “sport has been confused with religion.”2 Chandler resists the notion of the religion of sports most directly through two lines of argument. First, she challenges the notion that “one can understand the nature of any complex phenomenon by examining its observable characteristics.”3 She continues by arguing that the more important approach to the question of the religiosity of sport is whether or not people who consider themselves religious and those engaged in sport in some way would expect their devotions to meet similar needs.

Second, Chandler emphasizes the diversity of that which is already encompassed by
the term religion. She states, “the Christian and Navajo religions could scarcely be more
different. Yet both fulfill a religion’s unique foundation, which is that of dealing with
questions of ultimate meaning.” For Chandler, sport does not meet this foundational cut.

She writes:

> The parallels that have been drawn between sport and religion can equally
> well be drawn between opera and religion, theatre and religion, and indeed
> between any institutionalized activity and a devoted audience watching
> and/or interacting with trained participants. Sports is not unique in this
> regard. And if some philosophers want to stretch the term “religion” to
> cover all such activities, they must recognize that by so doing they have
> robbed the word “religion” of the actual meaning it possesses for its
> practitioners.5

Chandler does not deny the comparability of sport and religion; instead, she
challenges the utility of these comparisons for making claims that any two social
institutions maintain a shared identity. Particularly on the arguments pertaining to the
religion of sports, Chandler argues that sport does not provide ontological claims which
are foundational to religion. She admits that, “Sport, like so many other human activities,
may give us some hints, some paradigms of the unique events of life and death;” but she
marks a clear distinction by stating, “it cannot attempt to explain them. That is the
function of religion.”6 What is at stake in this conversation for Joan Chandler? Why is it
important to argue that sport is not a religion? Chandler understands sport and religion as
categorically different social institutions. She maintains that this becomes increasingly
obvious with careful examination of how individuals experience and frame expectations
of each. To confuse the two is a mistake rooted in assumptions based on a false
confidence in the utility of comparable observable phenomena.
In their book *An Unholy Alliance: The Sacred and Modern Sports*, Robert Higgs and Michael C. Braswell present an argument against equating sport and religion that centers around the words *sacred* and *holy*. Their distinctions between the two, and their subsequent defense of their understanding of these terms chiefly characterizes their argument. For Higgs and Braswell, it is important recognize similarities one might find between religion and sport, but focusing on the differences between the two is even more crucial. As they put it:

> To have any chance of understanding the rapid transformation taking place in our culture, we need to understand as best we can the differences, as opposed to the similarities, between the holy, the “inconceivable,” that which according to Otto is “peculiar to the sphere of religion,” and the sacred, that which is held in special esteem in any field of human endeavor, and of the distinctions between both the “secular” and the “profane.”

Possibly the most significant point in the argument from Higgs and Braswell on the relationship between sport and religion is their understanding of the terms “sacred” and “holy.” Various scholars of religion have quite often used the words interchangeably and focused more on contrasting the sacred and the profane, but Higgs and Braswell take exception to the often assumed interchangeability of the terms “holy” and “sacred”:

> The pattern among theologians of sports is to contrast the exciting and transformative world of sports with the weary, humdrum, everyday world of the “profane,” from *pro* and *fanum* or “before a temple,” and with the “secular,” from *secularis*, “coming once in an age,” and *saeculum*, “generation.” In our book we will move in an opposite direction toward a more difficult territory and with a different purpose, contrasting the “sacred” with another idea, that of the “holy.”

Later likening the relationship between the holy and the sacred as being similar to a Venn Diagram, Higgs and Braswell desire to establish a clear distinction between the
holy and the sacred. From their perspective, this distinction is pivotal in explaining the nuanced reasons why sport does not qualify as religion. Higgs and Braswell question the extent to which sports can be considered sacred, but defend against any notion that sports qualify as a source of interaction or revelation of the holy. They write, “We contend that sports do not meet the standards of the holy, as some sports apologists claim, because holiness is another matter altogether as we will try to illustrate with the following definitions and distinctions.” Here is a direct claim to the superiority of the holy over the sacred, in a way that aims at presenting the holy as a being more than experiences of unique or special quality. Higgs and Braswell borrow from Webster’s dictionary to define the sacred in relation to the French sacren (to consecrate) as meaning “dedicated or set apart for the service or worship of deity.”

Higgs and Braswell conclude that the first aspect of their definition of the sacred as being “set apart,” or of unique quality, is applicable to the realm of sports, but sport does not exhibit any service or worship to the divine. The authors again concede that sport can be understood as something quasi-sacred, but clarify that this is a borrowed and incomplete way of understanding the sacred. Further, Higgs and Braswell assert:

Athletes, it might be said, worship with body, mind, and spirit, and fans enjoy their services, the display of extraordinary physical skills. Athletes strive mightily to transcend themselves, and fans watch with undeniable enthusiasm…To this we say there are many other things full of “enthusiasm”: business, sex, and war. In the past it was the purpose of religion to restrain or at least moderate such enthusiasms that they would not, like sports, become religions in themselves. “Joy,” like “sacred” and “redeem”—e.g., “Vols redeem themselves against Cats”—has been co-opted by Sports World to provide the impression that whatever religion once offered, sports can do the same but better, not by bringing joy to world but joy to the victors.

The sting of this claim is that in any way that sports can be considered sacred, such
sacredness is a co-opted concept that is borrowed from the realm of religion, not a shared element with religion. Nevertheless, scholars, fans, writers, coaches, and players alike often use “sacred terminology” to discuss sport. Higgs and Braswell understand that sporting enthusiasts can (and do) use such terms as sacred in description of sport, but they remain wary of the sacred and profane distinction blurring the lines of the sacred and holy distinction. The authors would agree that both sport and religion are communal and ritualistic in nature but they do not concede that this makes sport sacred in any sense that could be mistaken as holy. They argue that those who speak of the sacred in sports often compare the experiences sport provides in contrast to more mundane or profane experiences of everyday life. Higgs and Braswell further their distinction between the sacred and the holy by embracing such lines of discussion and responding by saying:

The idea of the sacred needs the idea of the profane, but the idea of the holy does not need either. Herein lies a major difference between sacred and holy: the possibilities of the holy exist everywhere in the world of the secular and profane—bedroom, kitchen, garden, bar, parking lot, sidewalk, shopping mall as well as in church or ball field, wherever the “holy spirit” decides to roam. The sacred depends on the idea of the holy, but the holy does not depend on the sacred as a human creation and certainly not upon the idea of victory in sports or war.12

Here again we see Higgs and Braswell communicating the holy to be beyond the sacred. The authors labor to provide detailed definitions of the holy and the sacred in order to distinguish the difference between the two. On the distinct nature of the holy, Higgs and Braswell borrow from Rudolf Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy.*13 Otto (1869-1937), a German theologian and philosopher, examined the concept of “the holy” and its function in various religions around the world. Later scholars would use the sacred interchangeably with Otto’s use of “the holy.” This interchanging of these terms, is that which Higgs and Braswell are resisting. Otto coined the phrase *mysterium tremendum et
fascinans to describe humanity’s interaction with “the holy.” To review the concept, encounters with the holy always involve an experience of mystery (mysterium), which invokes a feeling of fear or dread by its powerful presence (tremendous) and often comes bound along with feelings of awe and fascination (fascinans). Of such experiences Otto writes:

The feeling of it may come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of the deepest worship. It may pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing, as it were, thrillingly vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its ‘profane’, non-religious mood of everyday experience. It may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions, or lead to the strangest excitement, to intoxicated frenzy, to transport, and to ecstasy. It has wild and demonic forms and can sink to an almost grisly horror and shuddering. It has its crude, barbaric antecedents and early manifestations, and again it may be developed into something beautiful and pure and glorious. It may become the hushed, trembling, and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of—whom or what? In the presence of that which is a mystery inexpressible and above all creatures.¹⁴

These types of dramatic experiences of the holy as described by Otto are what Higgs and Braswell claim are often hijacked, co-opted, or borrowed by “apologists of the religion of sports.” Higgs and Braswell cite Eliade in reference to Otto discussing the holy as “wholly other” resembling “nothing either human or cosmic.”¹⁵ This holy cannot be co-opted or misconstrued in the same way that the term sacred is so often borrowed in non-religious spheres. Higgs and Braswell clarify:

The sacred, in contrast, can be and often is appropriated for use and exploration in politics, business, government, entertainment, and sports. The holy is far removed from all these but instructive to all of its existence, or even the possibility of its existence, is noted. If sports are a religion, then more ought to be said about their holy aspects. Though sports apologists do not hesitate to identify holy possibilities in sports in connection with “ultimacy,” their main emphasis is upon sports as sacred, which from our perspective they confuse with the holy.¹⁶
For Higgs and Braswell, the holy is substantially beyond a conversation of the sacred. Concepts of the sacred may be informed by the powerful influence of the holy, but the sacred does not impact the holy in the same way. In this way, the holy is beyond the sacred but in instructive relation to the sacred. To conflate the two—for Higgs and Braswell—constitutes attribution of qualities of the holy to the sacred or marginalization of the holy to make it in some way equivalent with the sacred. In either case, the authors argue that distinguishing between the holy and the sacred is crucial to discussing religion and sport. Or as they put it, “When the sacred becomes a substitute for the holy, as is the case with flags, state creeds, sports, science, and even religions, the condition is known as ‘warping,’ one definition of heresy that we believe is what happens when sports are considered a religion.”

In many ways, the bulk of Higgs and Braswell’s argument in An Unholy Alliance functions as a continuation from their distinction between concepts of the sacred and the holy. The authors establish their position on these terms, and it is this distinction that provides the foundation for the rest of their argument. In concord with their understanding of the term “sacred”—as something set apart or dedicated for the service of a deity or something that points toward the holy—Higgs and Braswell argue that sport does not act as a vehicle to the “wholly other” but instead simply provides sometimes exciting and dramatic but no less profane or secular reflections of society itself.

In review of some of Marshal McLuhan’s Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man, Higgs and Braswell make very direct claims about the social functioning of play and the cultural significance (or limitations) of sport. From McLuhan they quote, “Games, then, are contrived and controlled situations, extensions of group awareness that
permit a respite from customary matters. They are a sort of talking to itself on the part of society as a whole. And talking to oneself is a recognized form of play that is indispensable to any growth of self confidence.”

To this point Higgs and Braswell add that sport does not provide a religious experience by pointing or talking to the holy—something “wholly other”—instead with sport we are dealing with something much more secular than sacred.

Higgs and Braswell clarify this point, relying directly on their distinction between the sacred and holy:

We see nothing in games that seems to connect to the holy, the task of the sacred, or what should be the vehicle of the holy, which is not to suggest that this cannot happen to individuals in games and in other “nonreligious” settings…The holy works in mysterious ways, and no possibility in either the private or public spheres is beyond its reach, including, we acknowledge, athletics. What we are saying is that the function of sports as a category of human endeavor is not to connect us to that which is holy or even to remind us of the idea of the holy.

Here again the authors establish the “otherness of the holy” and narrowly define the sacred in a way that deems the stadium as a “nonreligious” setting. Higgs and Braswell are claiming that when apologists for the religion of sports speak to notions of the sacred in sport, this “sacred” is not a pointing to the holy—something “wholly other”—but instead a co-opted quasi-sacred that is chiefly informed by individual self-consciousness and societal norms. Thus, for Higgs and Braswell, references to the sacred in sports are lacking the important element of the holy, and without an emphasis on that which is “wholly other” sport cannot be religious. Higgs and Braswell continually place emphasis on how connection to the “wholly other” is that which chiefly defines religion. They argue:

In the case of the religion of sports, the question becomes who or what is
the God or gods, and if there is no deity as in some other religions, what ideals are served? If the religion of sports depends on the idea of the “sacred,” what is the relation of that idea to the ethics of play and, especially, to the idea of the holy? Here to repeat is where the dividing line occurs. We do not deny that holy experiences cannot occur in dramatic rituals such as sports, war, and politics, but it is not the purpose of these rituals to connect us with the holy, which, if it exists at all, is *peculiar to the sphere of religion* as an organized endeavor.²⁰

While conceding that experiences of the sacred—and even of the holy—are conceivably found in all aspects of private and public life, they argue that religion is best understood as that which is an “organized endeavor” to purposefully seek out the holy. This charge deems arenas such as sport, war, and politics as potential avenues for religious experiences but ultimately these realms are not innately religious.

Writers who produce longer volumes arguing for the religion of sport almost in all cases refer to experiences of something sacred. Most commonly this appears in the discussion of sporting examples of “sacred time” and “sacred space.” Higgs and Braswell argue these uses of the term “sacred” in description of sport are instances where authors are either completely mistaken or simply dangerously wielding problematically loosely defined co-opted understandings of the sacred. While firmly fixed in their position that sport does not constitute a religion, Higgs and Braswell often extend their perception of what apologists for the religion of sports might conclude. In their attempts to dismantle the notion that modern sports function as a religion, the authors provide commentary aimed at navigating how sports might be misunderstood as religious. Of sports in general, Higgs and Braswell argue:

> Every sporting contest, in more respects than we might be willing to admit, is a battle for King of the Wood (or Hill), a struggle to see who among the combatants is the most fecund, who can protect the “sacred” territory of our zones of defense in combative sports against the audacity of upstarts or familiar foes, that is, rival tribes. Such tribes keep returning
year after year across state lines to wrest from us titles and honors that are, we feel, rightly ours, a struggle to see who can “bring rain” and “good crops” and who must be banished as scapegoat from any territory of drought. 21

Higgs and Braswell equate the religion of modern sports to an imported concept of primitive or archaic religion into modern society. The authors grant that sports have increasingly become interwoven with many other aspects of culture that act as rites of passage for both young boys and girls and that sports maintain many parallels with various religious traditions. But Higgs and Braswell conclude that such parallels between the social functioning and the institutional make up of sport and religion do not reveal sport to be a type of religion. Instead, the authors warn against such comparisons and blurring of the lines between “religious” and “nonreligious” aspects of culture. They argue that instead of allying sport and religion, the two social institutions should provide checks upon the other, and to conflate the two allows for sport and religion to become “‘occupations’ of a leisure class, each supporting the worst fears of the other in the form of invidious distinction.” 22

Again, we see Higgs and Braswell preserving—or protecting—their concept of the holy in their warning against calling sport a religion. This becomes clear when they reiterate what stands to be lost when the lines between sport, business, war, politics, and religion are blurred. They explain further by saying:

What we stand to lose is not so much what is called traditional religion but further loss of distinction between human categories of religion, business, sports, and war so that one day, as trivialization grows, they may be as indistinguishable as in the earliest rites of primitive man. Indeed they already share a common language of sacred self-glorification. One listens almost in vain from any quarter for some clue of the sense of the holy that requires humility instead of the sacred dictates of corporate takeovers, interventionist wars, and suicide bombings. With so much sacredness everywhere in everything, especially in our wars, one wonders if the
Lord’s Prayer has not already been fulfilled.23

What is at stake for Higgs and Braswell? Why defend the terms “sacred” and “holy” at such lengths? They understand the religion of sport as a construction of modern society borrowing concepts from traditional religion, and to conflate the two is not merely a misnomer but a dangerous step that holds consequences for interaction with the holy. While the authors never deny the similarities between the social functioning and institutional make up of sports and various religious traditions, it is the differences between the two that prohibit sport from being considered as a form of religion. Furthermore, they claim that it is the misunderstandings and misuse of concept of the holy that are at the foundation of the sport as religion conversation. For Higgs and Braswell, it is a proper understanding of the holy that brings clarity to this conversation.

Tara Magdalinski and Timothy Chandler - Sport in the Service of Religion

In the introduction to their book With God on Their Side: Sport in the Service of Religion, Tara Magdalinski and Timothy J. L. Chandler discuss sport and religion as globally pervasive cultural institutions. Through examining various historical case studies from numerous cultural and religious contexts, Magdalinski and Chandler argue that the institutions of sport and religion maintain similarities but ultimately are not the same. They emphasize that structural comparisons and the pursuit of classifying sport as religion “obscures the complexities of this relationship.”24 As they contend, the relationship between sport and religion extends well beyond comparative frameworks. These authors further clarify their resistance to the comparison of sport and religion in reference to work from Robert Higgs and Joan Chandler:

We do not deny the reverence shown by athletes for their faith, nor the
group prayers, nor the zealous dedication to task. Yet neither do we wish to overstate the relationship or insinuate that there is some kind of ‘natural’ affinity between sport and religion, simply because the ritualistic character of one resembles that of the other. Indeed, as Robert Higgs suggests, sport and religion are in fact incompatible in many ways. And contrary to those who argue that sport represents a kind of secular or civic faith, we are more convinced by Joan Chandler who quite bluntly states that ‘sport is not a religion’.25

What is at stake for Tara Magdalinski and Timothy J. L. Chandler? Why challenge the notion of sport as religion? They conclude that the relationship between sport and religion is much more complex than being comparable institutions. For these two authors, sport and religion are not the same, but can greatly influence one another. As they write of their aims in their book, “we have conceived this volume to investigate the role of sport and religion in the social formation of collective groups, and we are specifically concerned with the means by which sport might operate in the service of a religious community and assist in the promulgation of its theology.”26 Ultimately, their contention is that sport and religion are both arenas through which individuals reaffirm their community bonds, often overlapping in the process, but distinctly two separate types of social institutions.

Conclusion

All of these writers resisting the notion of sport as religion deliver their arguments with slightly different approaches and motivations. Common to all of these thinkers is the idea that the move to classify sport as a form of religion is a mistake or misadventure with numerous consequences. Their challenges seek to redirect the conversation between sport and religion away from the pursuit of equating one with the other. Review of these objections, considered along with arguments for understanding sport as being religious,
completes a general overview of the current landscape of the conversation about the
notion of the religion of sports.

Notes

1 Joan M. Chandler, “Sport is Not a Religion,” in Religion and Sport, ed. Shirl J. Hoffman
2 Joan M. Chandler, “Sport is Not a Religion,” 55.
3 Ibid.
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Chapter Three – Is College Basketball a Religion in Kentucky?

The state of Kentucky has a long history with the game of basketball. In the state, men’s college basketball is unparalleled in sporting significance. The state is home to three historically good men’s NCAA Division I college basketball programs. The University of Louisville, Western Kentucky University, and the University of Kentucky all rank in the top twenty programs in relation to the highest win totals and highest winning percentage throughout the history of men’s college basketball. The University of Kentucky currently stands atop both of those lists. Each of these three basketball programs has evolved into extremely pervasive cultural icons within the state of Kentucky. Transcending the arena of athletics, college basketball’s importance to the state should not be underestimated. This chapter will provide an overview of the relationship between Kentucky and the game of basketball. This case study is then used to test arguments from the academic conversation on the relationship/parallels between sport and religion, by investigating how basketball in the state of Kentucky fits into that discussion.

Why Basketball?

While college football traditionally takes sporting precedence in the American South, in the state of Kentucky college basketball is par excellence. Why is college basketball so important to the state? There are two compelling arguments, each of which speaking to Kentucky’s affinity for college basketball, and when taken together they provide a formidable response to this question. In order to properly address the sport’s significance to the state one must start at the beginning, and by the beginning I mean 1792, the year
Kentucky became a state.

In the first few years after becoming the fifteenth state of the United States, land in Kentucky was being claimed rather quickly. A native Kentuckian photographer and author, Harold M. Kelley, writes that this process of distribution of land within the newly formed state was “often not fairly or equally distributed among its many new inhabitants.”¹ By the early 1800s, the consequences of this unfair land allotment had made way for stark economic disparity in the state. Following the Civil War, many less fortunate Kentuckians were easily persuaded to sell the rights to timber or mine on any land they owned. The growing business of exporting coal from the state led to the construction of “coal towns.” Kelley explains that due to the thinly spread population of the state, “coal companies needed to build entire towns and businesses to support their business.”²

 Kelley demonstrates how the origin and continued sustenance of life in small towns throughout Kentucky, most drastically in eastern Kentucky, has historically been contingent on the outside exploitation of the region’s resources. It has been the case that the economic well-being of thousands of Kentuckians has long been intimately tied to the success and prerogatives of large coal companies. Today, over two hundred years after becoming a state, many regions of Kentucky continue to suffer economic depression. Kelley recounts this history in his book *Legacies of Kentucky Mountain Basketball*, to provide an argument for the rise of participation and appreciation of basketball in the state. On explaining the importance of basketball to Kentuckians, Kelley writes:

> A simple explanation is that in order to have a game, one only needs five players on a team, a hoop of some kind and a court, either outside or inside. Often pickup games will have as few as two on a team, so a total of four can have a serious game of two on two. Many have said that there
simply wasn’t much to do in these towns and the roads were so bad they couldn’t go anywhere else, so basketball it was.³

Dave Kindred, in his book *Basketball: The Dream Game in Kentucky*, similarly states that “With its small, rural towns, none with much money, Kentucky came naturally by basketball, a simple game that could be played by any kid with a ball, a hoop, and a dream.”⁴ Being a sport that demanded only a few participants, and very little equipment in comparison to other team sports, basketball thrived in even the most remote parts of Kentucky. In the first half of the twentieth century it was the high school game, not the college game, that Kentuckians cherished the most. Of high school basketball in Kentucky during this time, Kelley writes:

> It was a time when many small communities and towns were put on the map by the play of their local high school teams. Some communities weren’t even towns themselves, but their teams played as good as or better than any from the state. It was a time when folks would crowd into the gyms just to watch their favorite teams play, and those who couldn’t make it inside would stay outside with someone calling out the score out the front door to the crowd gathered fighting the elements.⁵

This devotion to local teams would later lead to a stronger affection for the university teams. The hometown boys would eventually graduate and some would go on to play college basketball. After 1950, the fervor for college basketball programs began to slowly match and eventually surpass the state’s first love of the high school game. As more and more high school players from the state had success playing at universities, widespread interest in the university teams began to grow. Even today, fans from various teams within the state exhibit a continued sense of pride in the “hometown kid” who “stays home” and plays at a college in Kentucky. In order to fully appreciate why Kentuckians care so much about college basketball, both an understanding of the history of economic struggle in the state and the power of hometown pride is crucial.
Eddyville, Kentucky is a small town best known as the location of the Kentucky State Penitentiary. The looming “Castle on the Cumberland” is a massive stone prison that towers over the shore of Lake Barkley. Roughly 220 miles southwest of Lexington and the University of Kentucky, most of Eddyville’s approximate 2,500 residents follow the University of Kentucky Wildcats and would quickly point anyone interested in college hoops northeast up the Bluegrass Parkway towards their perceived center of the college basketball world. On March 21, 2008, Eddyville’s eye was not fixed on Big Blue, but instead the small town in Lyon County watched—with the rest of the state and college basketball fans around the country—as hometown product Ty Rogers took a twenty-six-foot jump shot from the right wing.

Unlike the majority of his friends, family, and neighbors, Ty Rogers grew up cheering for the Hilltoppers of Western Kentucky University (WKU). He began playing basketball at a very young age. When Rogers was nine years old, he won a national foul-shooting competition, beating out more than three million other participants by making thirty shots in thirty attempts in the Elks Club National Free Throw Contest finals in Indianapolis.\(^6\)

By the time he graduated from Lyon County High School in 2004, Rogers set a state high school record with 407 three-pointers and was seventh in Kentucky history with 3,300 points scored in his high school career.\(^7\) Still, the long range shooter was overlooked by traditional powers such as Kentucky and Louisville because they considered him to be too small and not quick enough.

Passed over by many schools, Rogers happily landed at Western Kentucky University. During his four years with the program Ty was a steady player who rarely posted spectacular numbers, but always remained a good shooter capable of stretching a
defense. While he made over 200 three-pointers for WKU, it was one moment and one shot on March 21, 2008, that would decide his place in Hilltopper lore. Rodger’s twelfth-seeded Hilltoppers were matched up against a fifth-seeded Drake Bulldogs team in the first round of the NCAA Tournament. Drake had not reached the tournament since 1971, but had finished the regular season with a twenty-one game winning streak. WKU was a long-shot to beat Drake and the underdog Hilltoppers found themselves in a tough spot, trailing Drake by one point with just under six seconds left in overtime.

WKU senior guard Tyrone Brazelton took the inbound pass and began quickly making his way up the court. Brazelton had already scored a career-high thirty-three points on the night, and the play was supposed to see Tyrone dribble the length of the court to take the final shot. Upon crossing mid court Brazelton made for the right wing and drew two Drake defenders as he made his way inside the three point arc. Brazelton, with great court awareness and poise, saw Rogers trailing him and kicked a pass to Ty, who let a three-pointer go with just over a second left. The buzzer sounded as the shot clanged through and the crowd roared with astonishment. Western pulled off the upset, and the hometown boy from Eddyville cemented his place in Hilltopper and NCAA tournament history. Tom Spousta of the New York Times recalled the moment following the shot in his column the next morning:

Ty Rogers sprinted down the court, his Western Kentucky teammates in frantic tow, and circled back to the exact spot where he had just inducted himself into the pantheon of NCAA tournament buzzer-beaters. Rogers tugged on his jersey to make sure nobody would forget his No. 5. He pounded his chest in the universal sign of showing heart, before the rest of the Western Kentucky Hilltoppers finally chased him down…Moments after his players mobbed Rogers, Horn (WKU’s coach) faced the fans and pounded his fist to his chest. “You gotta believe, baby,” he shouted. “You gotta believe.”
Anyone watching the game at home could see the ecstatic response of the crowd on hand for the game, but the celebration at the game was just a sample of the response from fans who were watching as Rogers’ shot rattled through. Across the country in Palo Alto, California, WKU Athletics Director Wood Selig was allowed pause from his duties with the NCAA women’s tournament selection committee and was directed to a television in the Stanford University men’s locker room to watch the end of the game. Of the moment when Rogers’ shot fell through Selig said, “I was screaming all by myself. I threw open the door, and I started running down the hall. I just wanted to hug somebody.”9 Back at Lyon County High, when the game went into overtime, Principal Carroll Wadlington requested that the game to be turned on on every TV in the school. When the former Lyon County graduate dropped the game winner through the hoop the school celebrated as one. Wadlington described the school’s reaction, “For that moment, it was like one collective scream spread throughout the whole building…it was really cool.”10

On the campus of WKU, students began pouring out of buildings in collective jubilee, the campus bells rang constantly for minutes, and crowds amassed in common areas in celebration of the Toppers victory. Ty Rogers’ buzzer beating twenty-six-foot shot was immediately recognized as something “classic” or “legendary.” Hilltopper fans still refer to the deep right wing dagger as “the shot.”

The kid from Eddyville had done something spectacular, and the stories of that one moment have been told many times over. These stories of dramatic moments in sport, so intense and meaningful to many, are often used to argue that sport is a religious phenomenon. Fans of basketball in Kentucky love these stories of moments where kids like Rogers become hometown heroes, not only because of the thrilling nature of
moments like Rogers’ shot, but also because in many ways Kentuckians historically have had little to celebrate. The success of college basketball programs in Kentucky provides opportunity for people in the state to share in the experience of success by being a fan of winning teams. In the introduction to his book *Game of My Life: Kentucky Memorable Stories of Wildcats Basketball Players*, Ryan Clark speaks to the Kentuckian need for something to take pride in:

In a state with so much sports history—the Kentucky Derby, Muhammad Ali, Johnny Unitas, Paul Hornung, Pee Wee Reese—there has always been someone to root for. But there are no professional sports teams. And of those teams closest to us, in Indianapolis or Cincinnati or Nashville, none are perennial winners. Not like Kentucky basketball. As I try to explain to people who are not sports fans, Kentuckians can only call themselves “the best” in a few categories. Much too often, the state falls to the bottom in statistics of literacy, education, teen pregnancy, or job growth. And for all these faults, we are a proud people, and we search for things to be proud of. Thankfully, there’s always been the Wildcats.\(^\text{11}\)

Clark is presenting college basketball as Kentucky’s redeeming quality. He maintains that Kentuckians can find, through this sport, a way to be proud of their home. It is religion that commonly provides—both individuals and groups—experiences of transcendence, alternative contexts for meaning in life, sensations of freedom from normal mundane limitations, feelings of group solidarity, and a strong sense of identity. In Kentucky, basketball can be observed as very similarly a source of these traditionally religious elements. Together these authors—Clark, Kindred, and Kelley—claim that basketball has provided Kentuckians with an opportunity to play, a basis for communal pride, and a possibility to share in the experience of success. Basketball’s influence in the state, specifically as a source of personal and communal identity, has been so pervasive that it can easily be compared to religion.
Where Winning Means Everything

While there are more than three men’s college basketball programs in the state, the University of Louisville, Western Kentucky University, and the University of Kentucky have established themselves as both historically good basketball programs in the state and in the nation. Almost unmatched in Kentucky basketball lore is the name Adolf Rupp. For forty-one seasons as the head coach of the University of Kentucky Wildcats, Rupp led the Cats to four national titles and a total of 876 wins, including a stretch of winning ninety-two of ninety-four games. While Adolf Rupp may be a more well recognized name among college basketball fans, he is not the only coaching legend in Kentucky. In many ways, Rupp had a contemporary who meant almost as much to his university’s basketball success, if not more, as Rupp did for the University of Kentucky.

Like Rupp, Ed Diddle experienced tremendous success at Western Kentucky University for forty-two seasons. In that span, Western Kentucky won thirty-two conference championships and played in three NCAA tournaments and eight Nation Invitation Tournaments (NIT). Diddle coached Western to at least twenty wins a season eighteen times, doing so ten years in a row from 1934 to 1944. Diddle’s overall record was 759 wins and 302 losses.

Both Adolf Rupp and Ed Diddle are members of the Naismith Memorial Hall of Fame. On their accomplishments and contrasting personalities, Dave Kindred writes:

No heart was so hard to refuse admittance to Ed Diddle. It was extraordinary that in a small state like Kentucky two college basketball coaches would gain everlasting fame. In his khakis, Adolf Rupp sent teams to war with instructions to take no prisoners. He was Gen. Patton with a whistle…Only 150 miles away in Bowling Green, Rupp’s contemporary, Ed Diddle, made Western Kentucky a power of such strength that when he died in 1970 UK and Western ranked 1-2 nationally in all-time victories.
Though giants in college basketball coaching history, Rupp and Diddle were not rivals, which may sound quite odd considering the proximity between the two successful schools. The two teams never met until the 1971 NCAA tournament, a game that Western Kentucky won handily. The loss was humiliating for Rupp and his Wildcats. A main reason the two schools had not played before 1971 was due to Rupp’s hesitancy to schedule in-state competition. He believed that a win would not be respected nationally and a loss would be seriously damaging to the school’s reputation. It would not be until the 1980s that Kentucky’s most prominent basketball in-state rivalry would develop.

When it comes to college basketball rivalries, one might be hard pressed to find a rivalry more preeminent than the one between the University of Kentucky and the University of Louisville. The programs both claim storied histories. The Wildcats (of the University of Kentucky) currently hold the most all-time wins and highest all-time winning percentage in NCAA Men’s Basketball history. Kentucky leads all schools in NCAA tournament appearances, tournament wins, and ranks second only to the University of California, Los Angeles in national championships, with eight. The Cardinals (of the University of Louisville) currently rank eleventh in all-time victories, eighth in all-time winning percentage, and have won three national championships. From 1944-1990, Louisville totaled forty-six straight winning seasons. The streak is an unmatched accomplishment, as no other team has seen such success in the history of college basketball.

The programs first played each other in 1913, and from 1913 to 1922 the schools played a total of nine times, with Kentucky winning seven of the competitions and Louisville finding victory in only two. From 1923-1982, the schools only met on three
occasions (1948, 1951, and 1959). The latter two games only occurred due to being matched up in the NCAA tournament. Otherwise, it seemed that the two programs would simply not play each other. After a drought of twenty-four years following the 1959 matchup, the stars aligned for fans in the state as the two schools were forced to play in the 1983 NCAA tournament—a game that would be remembered as the “dream game.”

Louisville’s twelve-point win, in overtime of that 1983 matchup, can be considered one of the most important moments in the history of the rivalry. Kentucky basketball coach Joe B. Hall—like his legendary predecessor coach Adolf Ruff—was uninterested in playing other “smaller” state schools. Louisville’s victory provided Hall—and the University of Kentucky—with all the reason needed to begin scheduling opportunities to avenge their loss. Immediately following the “dream game,” the two schools began playing regularly, and have continued to play each other every year, rotating between meeting in Louisville and Lexington.

The long history of basketball success of these two Kentucky schools—along with regularly scheduled meetings between the programs—has fostered one of the greatest rivalries in college basketball history. The two schools kept the national championship in the state of Kentucky for both the 2011-12 and 2012-13 seasons—as Kentucky won its eighth national title in 2012 and Louisville claimed its third title in 2013. Kentucky was forced to play Louisville in the 2012 semi-final game, and the Wildcats prevailed over the Cards on their way to the title. The following season, the two teams were set to play in Louisville and Louisville Coach Rick Pitino—who is unique to this rivalry, as he has coached both schools to national championships—encouraged Louisville supporters to make a strong effort to keep Louisville’s KFC Yum! Center a true home-court advantage.
When asked about the December 2010 match-up between the schools in Louisville, when a large number of Kentucky fans attended the Wildcat’s win over the Cardinals, Pitino responded:

They infiltrate our arena, we don’t infiltrate their arena. If a Kentucky fan gives their ticket away to a Louisville fan, they feel, whether they are Catholic, Christian, Jewish, that they go to hell...It’s different. Our people don’t feel they go to hell if they give their ticket to Big Blue Nation...It really upset our A.D. [athletic director]. It really bothered him. It didn’t bother me because they get in everywhere.¹⁹

Coach Pitino’s team beat Coach John Calipari’s Kentucky Wildcats, adding another quality win along Louisville’s route to the 2013 national championship. In total, the two schools have met forty-seven times—with Kentucky leading the all-time series 32-15. While unbalanced in total wins, this rivalry is thriving in today’s college basketball scene. As the two schools are roughly seventy-five miles apart, multiple generations of fans of both programs have worked, played, and lived together. With no professional sports teams in Kentucky, the long history and success of these two programs has helped to hold college basketball as the preeminent sport in the state. In a recent Nielsen media report, Kentucky and Louisville were ranked the first (UK) and second (UL) best local college basketball fan bases—based on the percentage of the population that watched, attended, or listened to each team’s games in 2013.²⁰

The rich traditions of both the Kentucky and Louisville basketball programs have spanned over a century. During this time both programs have hosted their basketball games in numerous venues, spaces that many Kentuckian’s consider sacred. These gymnasiums, courts, and arenas play a unique part in the narratives of these basketball traditions. Four locations in particular take precedence.

While the University of Kentucky did not first play basketball in this venue, from
1950-1976 Memorial Coliseum would house the transformation of Kentucky from a good basketball program into one of the most iconic basketball programs of all-time. Prior to moving to Memorial Coliseum, Kentucky had hosted basketball games in four other venues—State College Gymnasium, Buell Armory Gymnasium, Woodland Park Auditorium, and Alumni Gymnasium. Nicknamed “The House That Rupp Built,” Memorial Coliseum seated 12,000, housed a swimming pool, and held offices for the staff. The basketball program called Memorial Coliseum home for twenty-six seasons, selling out all of their 345 home games in the venue.\(^{21}\)

Rupp Arena opened in 1976, a 23,500-seat venue named after coach Adolph Rupp that still presently houses the University of Kentucky basketball program. The school has consistently led the country in home attendance since the venue opened. Kentucky holds a 510-64 all-time record in the venue, and has filled the rafters with national championship, national runner-up, conference title, retired player, and retired coach banners.\(^{22}\) Rupp Arena hosted the 1985 men’s basketball Final Four, the 1986 Men’s SEC Conference Tournament, and the 1986 Women’s Final Four.\(^{23}\)

Columnist—and life-long North Carolina Tar Heel fan—Andrew Sharp traveled to the University of Kentucky’s Rupp Arena in 2009 to root on his Tar Heels and to write a piece about the Rupp Arena experience. Sharp writes:

> It was equal parts terrifying (as a Carolina fan) and exhilarating (as a basketball fan). Just out of this world. Most college basketball is just looked upon as a game, even at a place like Carolina. People love it, but with perspective…At Kentucky, it was more like… “Basketball is life here, John Wall is God, and Carolina can go to hell.” How can you not love that?…Through generations of families, people have been going nuts over Kentucky basketball, and that’s why the grown men, women, 17-year-old daughters, and 70 something grandparents still make the weekly pilgrimages to Rupp Arena. Because they live and breathe Kentucky basketball, and it’s something they’ve been doing for years…Everyone in
that stadium LOVES basketball, and the whole experience down there is a tribute to what this game can mean to people.  

Younger generations may not quite understand the historic stature of University of Louisville’s Freedom Hall. The venue has been the site of six Final Fours and ten conference tournaments. The Louisville basketball program had previously called numerous small gymnasiums home. After longer stints in the Belknap Gymnasium and the Jefferson County Armory, the basketball team moved into Freedom Hall for the 1956 season. Louisville native and ESPN writer Pat Forde writes, “for a span of 30 years, (Freedom Hall) was arguably the most relevant address in the game.” Kentucky also made use of the facility, playing at least one home game in Freedom Hall every year from 1958 to 2011. For many Kentucky fans, it was an easier opportunity to acquire tickets than making it to a game in Rupp Arena.

In an article dedicated to the memory of Louisville’s Freedom Hall, one can see that the writers are speaking about a space that is truly special. Pat Forde writes, “The fans have always been what brought Freedom Hall to life. Their fervor for the home team and understanding of the game take a backseat to none, making the Hall the shrine it has been for 54 years.” On his experience of Freedom Hall, Jay Bilas writes, “Every time I walk into Freedom Hall, I think not of specific games, but of excellence and the players that pursued it in that building. Louisville basketball will be great in the new building, but it will never be the same for those that saw the Cardinals soar in Freedom Hall. It was remarkable.”

Since the 2010-11 season, the University of Louisville Cardinals have played their home games at the KFC Yum! Center. With a seating capacity of 22,800, including state of the art suites and box seating, the facility is a masterpiece filled with new technology.
that provided Louisville with a brand new home, as Freedom Hall had long since been showing its age. The Cardinals have a 66-9 record in the new venue, tallying those wins on Denny Crum Court, the playing surface in the KFC Yum! Center that has been named after former coach Denny Crum.29

College basketball is important in the state of Kentucky. Many Kentuckians shudder at the notion that the sport could be lessened in significance by the thought that it is “just a game.” The sport has historically been a source of hope, providing Kentuckians with a chance to dream big in spite of hardship. Attacks against the merit of the game, specific teams, or the passion of spectators are a serious social offense. Kindred explains this further as he writes:

They care about basketball in Kentucky. You can curse the bourbon they make; pass the Scotch please. If country ham upsets your nervous system with its thirsty demand for a gallon of water after breakfast, then no one will care much if you go for the sausage instead. You can ignore horse racing, too, passing it off as a rich man’s hobby and a poor man’s disease. Do all that if you want. You will get by. But to live in peace in Kentucky you should have mastered the reverse pivot by age 9.30

The reverse pivot is a basketball move that an offensive player—when in possession of the ball—can use to create space from a defender. Kindred may playfully walk the line between reality and exaggeration, as there is no nine-year-old reverse pivot exam in the state. Still, his style of commentary on the importance of the game is telling. He portrays basketball in Kentucky as being an institution beyond the sphere of taste—in which he places other staples of Kentucky culture including bourbon, country ham, and horse racing. These he claims are matters of taste that can be rejected with few social consequences. But to reject or dismiss the merit of the game of basketball, as important as it is to Kentucky history and to many Kentuckians today, this, Kindred warns, can be a
much stronger offense.

A Form of Religion?

Drawing the line between basketball as a Kentucky sport or a Kentucky religion may be a difficult task, maybe even utterly hopeless. But the question remains: Where does sport end and religion begin? In a state where one game has been so central to the lives of many, can this game be understood as a religious phenomenon? Analyzing this case of college basketball in Kentucky with past and present arguments on the potential religious nature of sport can bring some clarity to this question.

Michael Novak, one of the earlier writers pushing for serious consideration for the study of sport as a religious phenomenon, emphasizes that there are various shared characteristics between the arenas of sport and religion. He argues that religion has at least seven easily identifiable elements that are equally present in sport. To summarize, they are that religions are organized, built for character development, rely on human responses to contingency, involve loyalty to that which is local, incorporate concepts of sacred time, contain heroic forms, recognize various myths and symbols, and provide an avenue for human beings to be exhilarated. Charles Prebish, building on Novak’s work in an attempt to reveal what he understands as an obvious case for the religion of sports, expresses frustration with Novak and other writers for not boldly identifying sport as a religion. He toils to take the concepts mentioned by Novak and demonstrate more complete and varied examples of their manifestations within sport. Prebish can find some solace here, as all of Novak’s seven elements of religion can be identified in the case of college basketball in Kentucky.
Basketball is a game that takes place within a system of rules that govern everything from the amount of points scored to the ways in which participants can interact with the ball, the playing surface, and one another. The game of basketball can only be actualized through acceptance and adherence to its organized set of rules. Being designed as a team sport, more formally involving player-to-player as well as coach-to-player relationships, basketball naturally establishes an environment for the development of character. The game encourages players and coaches to exert themselves through hard work and repetition in order to become better at the sport. This practice encourages discipline, often demanding self-denial from players who push their bodies to the limit, and the need for experimentation by coaches to develop creative new styles of play.

As exemplified in the story of Ty Rogers’ last second heroics, basketball consistently provides moments where participants, coaches, and spectators all are reminded of humanity’s often powerless position in relation to the happenings of chance. For many reasons, moments like Rogers’ game-winner appeal to fans and players alike; including the possibility of participating in—or experiencing—victory in spite of the sometimes precarious nature of life. Basketball in Kentucky has not only provided moments of significance, but the game has also been a long-standing source of local, regional, and state pride. Loyalty to both high school and college teams in Kentucky is easily observable in the form of bumper stickers, t-shirts, car flags, yard ornaments, etc.

Some of the more high profile games played at the college level will be watched by thousands of spectators in the arena. Millions more listen and watch elsewhere through game broadcasts on radio and television. Basketball’s game and shot clocks are devices used to structure the length of total play and the amount of time each team has to take a
shot while possessing the ball. These clocks, mark off a different kind of time than that of normal life—what could be called sacred time in the game of basketball. During a game, participants and spectators can become so concerned with time on both the game and shot clocks that concepts of regular time are often forgotten. While the world does not stop for a basketball game, for players and fans there are other measures of time that hold significance beyond the concerns of normal time.

The coaching legends as well as great individual and team achievements in the history of college basketball in Kentucky serve as heroic forms and marks of excellence inspiring current participants to strive for success. As for the fans, who are not participating in the game in the same manner as the players, traditions of success at college basketball programs have fostered legends, myths, and symbols that spectators can more directly embrace. The most easily observable form of this is the clothing fans wear containing logos, mascots, or other symbols representing their chosen team. And similar to the last of Novak’s aspects of religion, basketball has captured the attention of millions of Kentuckians. Not only does the sport offer aesthetic appeal during the activity of play, but also present at the common college basketball game are mascots, cheerleaders, and band members who are all intentionally present for the purpose of providing fans and players with sources of exhilaration. The sport has historically proven to be very influential for both individuals and communities within Kentucky.

In the book From Season to Season, Joseph Price claims that—like religion—sports “enable participants to explore levels of selfhood that otherwise remain inaccessible; they establish means for bonding in communal relations with other devotees…and they provide the prospect for experiencing victory and thus sampling, at least in an
anticipatory way, ‘abundant life.’” All of these elements can also be seen in the case of basketball in Kentucky, as the sport has historically represented, united, and lifted folk heroes up out of otherwise economically depressed and exploited areas of the state.

Basketball has been an invitation for personal and communal success, which has been extremely important for Kentuckians. Again, as Ryan Clark writes, “Kentuckians can only call themselves ‘the best’ in a few categories. Much too often, the state falls to the bottom in statistics of literacy, education, teen pregnancy, or job growth. And for all these faults, we are a proud people, and we search for things to be proud of.” In Kentucky, basketball has been a consistent source of potential success, a cultural phenomenon that has allowed participants and players to experience pride, and even opportunity for the possibility to experience fame.

Beyond the goal of winning, Randolph Feezell argues that sport provides participants and spectators with a variety of other reasons to enjoy sport. Feezell’s arguments about the play theory of sport and the aesthetic experience of sport are corroborated in the case of basketball in Kentucky. The social and personal benefits of playing the game—including the personal sense of freedom in play—are extremely appealing to players. What Feezell might call the “intrinsically beautiful” nature of the game, this aesthetic element of the sport also appeals to millions of Kentuckians who ritually watch basketball.

In Game Day and God, Eric Bain-Selbo states, “I believe that sport is replacing religion, though, based on the argument in the preceding chapters, I would argue that this is a substitution of form rather than substance.” He clarifies this point by explaining that people can express their religiosity in a variety of ways, both inside and outside the arena
of traditional religion. In relation to his research on college football, Bain-Selbo postulates that it may be the case that passionate religious people are the same type of people who are passionate about sport. He writes, “the person who has the personality of a ‘passionate devotee’ can be found in a stadium or in a church and, more often than not, in the former on Saturday and the latter on Sunday.”

By emphasizing that sport is replacing religion, Bain-Selbo is reinforcing his idea that the “sacred may change and look very different from one epoch to another, from one culture to another.” Bain-Selbo stresses the need to embrace the diverse and evolutionary nature of concepts of the sacred, and the evolving human relationship with the sacred. He argues, “expressing one’s religiosity predominately in the context of one’s college football team in the South is really no different from being a Methodist or Baptist.” For all its cultural pervasiveness, and well-documented significance to the state, basketball has yet to replace religion outright. But religion and the sport of basketball have both thrived in Kentucky.

Upon review of the arguments from scholars in favor of understanding sport as a religious phenomenon, basketball in Kentucky does not contradict their claims. The elements of religion that are argued to be present in sport can be observed in the case of basketball in Kentucky. Basketball in Kentucky serves as a nice case study for making the argument that sport is indeed a religion of some kind. Before we can go ahead and classify basketball a religion in Kentucky, however, it is important to also see if the case study corroborates or contradicts claims made by those who resist the notion that sport constitutes a religion.

Joan Chandler writes, “Whether we personally view religion as resulting from divine
revelation or from human aspirations and anxieties does not matter; what is important is that religions seek to explain the relationship between human beings and their circumstances.”

Chandler is communicating that a foundational aspect of religion is its ability to provide explanations for humanity’s place in the cosmos. She continues on to claim that even though “sport may epitomize or even reinforce a set of values peculiar to class, culture, or both, those values are not grounded in sport itself but derive from the sociocultural context within which sport is played.”

This distinction is made in Chandler’s attempt to undo the damage of sport being confused with religion because of “assuming that one can understand the nature of any complex phenomenon by examining its observable characteristics.”

The game of basketball does not make any normative or ontological claims about life itself. Any value system that the game reinforces is better understood as the sport being utilized to encourage values of the community where the game is played. She admits that “Sport…may give us some hints, some paradigms of the unique events of life and death;” but she clarifies, “it cannot attempt to explain them.”

The case of basketball in Kentucky does not contradict the claims made by Chandler.

Higgs and Braswell’s distinction between the holy and the sacred has a direct connection with how they address roles of both sport and religion. Specifically on the purposes of sport and religion, Higgs and Braswell write, “We do not deny that holy experiences cannot [sic] occur in dramatic rituals such as sports, war, and politics, but it is not the purpose of these rituals to connect us with the holy, which if it exists at all, is peculiar to the sphere of religion as an organized endeavor.”

Higgs and Braswell’s effort to protect narrowly defined concepts of the sacred and the holy are not impeded by
evidence found in the case of basketball in the state of Kentucky. Furthermore, none of their definitions, pertaining to sport and religion, are contradicted in the case of basketball in the state of Kentucky.

In the introduction to their book *With God on Their Side: Sport in the Service of Religion*, Tara Magdalinski and Timothy J. L. Chandler discuss sport and religion as globally pervasive cultural institutions that maintain similarities but that ultimately are not the same. They understand both sport and religion as significant “arenas through which citizens can participate to reaffirm the unity of their communities.” The case of basketball in Kentucky does not conflict with the argument about the relationship between sport and religion presented in this text. Instead, the history of the intersection of basketball and religious organizations in the state could possibly serve as a chapter of *With God on Their Side*.

**Conclusion**

Now we have reached an interesting position. Basketball in Kentucky does not directly provide contradictory evidence for any of the scholarly arguments reviewed within this text. This should not come as too much of a surprise. Serious academic work on the subject should not be easily dismissed by an examination of sport. But this presents an interesting question, which will be answered in the final chapter. If scholars can use the same evidence to draw different conclusions, how then do we decide if basketball is a religion in Kentucky? Furthermore, how is it that sport is or is not a religion?
Notes

3 Ibid., 13.
7 Schlabach, “Western Kentucky celebrating Rogers’ ‘dream’ shot.”
10 Story, “One moment, a lifetime of stories.”
12 Michael Bradley, *Big Blue: 100 Years of Kentucky Wildcats Basketball* (St. Louis, Sporting News, 2002), 43.
14 Ibid., 115.
15 All statistics for both the University of Kentucky and the University of Louisville are as of the end of the 2013-14 college basketball season.
24 Andrew Sharp, (2009, December 7) *A Close Encounter With Kentucky’s New God In
28 Ibid.
30 Kindred, Basketball, 8.
33 Clark, Game of my Life, ix.
35 Bain-Selbo, Game Day and God, 235.
36 Bain-Selbo, Game Day and God, 5.
37 Ibid., 235.
40 Ibid., 55.
41 Ibid., 57.
Chapter Four – Sport as Religion: A Matter of Definition

In the past fifty years, there has been a dramatic increase—across the disciplines—in serious academic work on sport. Interested scholars have taken very different approaches to the discussion of religion and sport. One of many debates that has arisen in this conversation surrounds the question of whether or not sport can be understood as a form of religion. This current volume is aimed at providing commentary on the evolution of the arguments concerning the religion of sport as well as providing conclusions on how the case of basketball in Kentucky fits into that debate.

This chapter is intended to answer the looming questions that arose at the end of the previous chapter. If scholars can use the same evidence to draw different conclusions, how then do we decide if basketball is a religion in Kentucky? How is it determined that any particular sport is or is not a religion? Ultimately, both of these questions are underneath the big picture question as to whether or not sport can be considered religious at all. In an effort to address all of these questions, I submit an argument that emphasizes that the ease—or difficulty—of the classification of any sport as a religion, and the starkly contrasting positions on this discussion, are primarily a result of variations within definitions of religion.

Is Sport a Religion?

Indeed, a strong case can be made that basketball in Kentucky is a religion of some kind. The histories—or narratives—of these programs become interwoven with the personal narratives of players, coaches, and spectators. Fans speak of team wins and losses as shared experiences, utilizing phrases such as “we won” or “they beat us.”
Basketball becomes personal, close, and extremely meaningful to many Kentuckians. Basketball in Kentucky provides individuals and communities with deep, influential, and lasting experiences. Randolph Feezell argues that sport stands as a rich source of meaningful contexts for individual and communal life. He explains the human need for story by claiming:

We may experience our life or parts of our lives as essentially storyless. And when we do, it is natural to seek out new stories, or return to areas of experience that offer the meaningful possibilities of story. I can think of no area in modern life (except watching television, I suppose) that offers more possibilities for storylike experiences than sports. Certainly viewing sports and being a “real fan” may appear to be more “transparently palliative” than reading our scriptures or praying to our gods.¹

Feezell’s concepts of the transcendental freedom in play and aesthetic beauty of sport can be understood as providing individuals and communities with rich alternative narratives that at the very least are capable of providing subsidiary meaningful experiences to our normal lives. Feezell adds, “Since people find aesthetic quality intrinsically satisfying and since people need stories in order to experience life as having some shape, pattern, or end, it is natural that so many people would be drawn to sport...Lovers of sport need not be apologetic about their appreciation of the aesthetic nor their need for story in life.”² Basketball serves many Kentuckians as a source of deep meaningful experiences, moments that have lasting powerful influences on the lives of entire families. This type of influence, powerful enough to draw inspiration for meaning in life, can be compellingly argued as maintaining a religious quality.

Reflecting on cheering for his beloved University of Kentucky Wildcats, Ryan Clark writes:

Together, Granddad and I have seen a lot. We’ve watched national championships, dramatic comebacks, and we’ve seen our share of losses,
too. We’ve gotten angry together, and we’ve screamed and celebrated until we were hoarse. It’s our thing, our tradition. It’s what we share. It is our passion.³

Throughout Kentucky, many University of Louisville, Western Kentucky University, and University of Kentucky basketball fans could echo stories similar to Clark’s. Stories of wins and losses, trips with family, great players and coaches, and teams that would have been better served to substitute five random fans into the game—these are the types of stories that many Kentuckians tell over and over again. On the impact of experiences of sport, Eric Bain-Selbo writes:

They [sports] are powerful and meaningful. They can inspire us. They certainly provide us wisdom about the human condition, and how we can persevere through our short time on the earth in ways that connect us with one another and motivate us to develop our skills and maximize our capacities. These are moments that legitimately can be called religious.⁴

In these comments, Bain-Selbo posits that experiences of such meaningful quality, regardless of their sphere of origin, can be legitimately considered religious. In the case of basketball in Kentucky, while not considered a form of traditional religion, the sport does influence Kentuckians in powerful and meaningful ways that can easily be observed as comparable to religion. But to make the claim that basketball is in fact a religion in Kentucky, there is a need for a more thorough conversation on how religion is defined. In order to move beyond only making comparisons between observable phenomenon within sport and religion to constituting sport as religion, there must be a conversation of the definition of religion being utilized. In order to constitute sport as a religion, it must first be clear what is meant by the term religion.

Most scholars, who argue that sport is a religious phenomenon rely on work from Mircea Eliade. More specifically, it is his extensive work on concepts of sacred space and
sacred time that are commonly utilized in arguments concerning the religion of sport. Eliade’s approach to religion, as well as his concepts of that which falls under the category of religion, has proven conducive for the purposes of arguing for sport as a religious phenomenon.

Mircea Eliade was a Romanian fiction writer, philosopher, and professor. Above all of those descriptions, Eliade is most widely remembered as an accomplished historian of religion. He was a leading scholar on religious experience, and his work on the subject is commonly utilized by writers who discuss sport and religion. Eliade’s understanding of religion is chiefly characterized by his concept of hierophanies—manifestations of the sacred. He argues that the sacred provides structure to the world—a structure that orients all things and people in relation to the sacred. In The Sacred and The Profane, Eliade speaks to how interpretations of the sacred impact concepts of space, time, nature, the cosmos, and the meaning of life. At the foundation of his concepts of the sacred and profane is his understanding of the two as differing modes of experiencing the world. He speaks to this distinction by stating:

Revelation of a sacred space makes it possible to obtain a fixed point and hence to acquire orientation in the chaos of homogeneity, to “found the world” and live in a real sense. The profane experience, on the contrary, maintains the homogeneity and hence the relativity of space.

In regard to sacred space, Eliade demonstrates how the embrace of, or ignorance of (or rejection of), the sacred carries unavoidable consequences for the individual’s larger cosmological perspective. For Eliade’s religious person, eruptions of the sacred within the universe have broken up the homogeneity of space. Such hierophanies result in “detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different.” Furthermore, Eliade argues that “The sacred reveals absolute reality and at
the same time makes orientation possible; hence it founds the world in the sense that it fixes the limits and establishes the order of the world.” Also, of interest with Eliade, is his concept of *axis mundi* (the center of the world), how this concept perpetuates an understanding of a “system of the world,” and how it is that religious individuals feel drawn towards the sacred. He explains:

Here, then, we have a sequence of religious conceptions and cosmological images that are inseparably connected to a system that may be called the ‘system of the world’ prevalent in traditional societies: (a) a sacred place constitutes a break in the homogeneity of space; (b) this break is symbolized by an opening by which passage from one cosmic region to another is made possible (from heaven to earth and vice versa; from earth to the underworld); (c) communication with heaven is expressed by one or another of certain images, all of which refer to the *axis mundi*: pillar (eg. The *universalis columna*), ladder (cf. Jacob’s ladder), mountain, tree, vine, etc.; (d) around this cosmic axis lies the world (= our world), hence the axis is located “in the middle,” at the “navel of the earth”; it is the Center of the World.\(^{10}\)

This concept of the *axis mundi*, and the nature of sacred space, explains various other religious beliefs and observable religious phenomena. These notions relate to the importance of concepts of homeland, promised land, and holy sites. On the street level, Eliade argues that the Christian believer understands a church to occupy a very different type of space from the street on which it is located. Furthermore, the door to the church is the “limit, the boundary, the frontier that distinguishes and opposes two worlds—and at the same time the paradoxical place where these worlds communicate, where passage from the profane to the sacred world becomes possible.”\(^{11}\)

Eliade’s descriptions of heirophanies, and his commentary on how human beings respond to the sacred, both demonstrate the pervasive power of perspectives on what is sacred. Eliade also details the concept of sacred time as being equally important and intimately connected with concepts of sacred space. He argues that religious individuals
experience a sense of time that is functioning separately from profane time. It is a measure of time that connects and orients all things. Eliade explains that “Religious man periodically finds his way into mythical and sacred time, re-enters the *time of origin,* the time that ‘floweth not’ because it does not participate in profane temporal duration, because it is composed of an *eternal present,* which is indefinitely recoverable.”¹² This concept of time, similar to concepts of sacred space, is uniquely set apart and crucial to Eliade’s concept of religious life.

Simply put, Eliade argues that if something is sacred in the universe, the very existence of the sacred changes everything. Its manifestation in the world is more than significant, it is foundational to the universe as a whole. If anything breaks apart the mundane universe with any unique specialness, this interruption is in no way trivial. Eliade explains how religious persons exist in a world that is defined and only fully realized in relation to that which is sacred. Humanity’s perspective of—and interaction with—the sacred is a matter of extreme significance.

Eliade’s arguments concerning how concepts of the sacred impact human beings have proven very useful for scholars interested in expanding the term religion to encompass sport. His concepts of sacred space and sacred time can easily be extended beyond the realm of traditional religion. Scholars have used his concepts to speak of basketball arenas as cathedrals and sports fans as congregants. Another theorist of religion, repeatedly cited throughout cases for sport as religion, is French scholar Emile Durkheim.

Emile Durkheim’s book, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life,* is considered a foundational text for the sociology of religion.¹³ Durkheim defined religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and
surrounded by prohibitions—beliefs and practices that unite its adherents in a single moral community called a church.” While Durkheim’s particular focus in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* is totemic religious communities in aboriginal Australia, he believes that his definition of religion stands up for all religion. Resounding clearly in his definition, is the notion that religion is a system that unites a community. In unpacking Durkheim’s comments on religion and the collective, it is imperative to discuss further his emphasis on beliefs, practices, and the sacred.

Durkheim notes that religious beliefs presuppose a classification of things into two opposite kinds—understood as that which is profane and that which is sacred. Furthermore, he argues that such beliefs about the sacred and profane are collective efforts, beliefs that are not only held by individuals that are part of a community, but even more precisely such beliefs help form the group itself. On this point, Durkheim argues:

> Religious beliefs proper are always held by a defined collectivity that professes them and practices the rites that go with them. These beliefs are not only embraced by all the members of this collectivity as individuals, they belong to the group and unite it. The individuals who make up this group feel bound to one another by their common beliefs. A society whose members are united because they share a common conception of the sacred world and its relation to the profane world, and who translate this common conception into identical practice, is what we call a church.¹⁵

In this commentary on religious beliefs, Durkheim argues that beliefs act as a binding agent of sorts, that which is shared by the individual and the group. Beyond religious beliefs alone, Durkheim characterizes religion as being divided into two types of phenomena: beliefs and rites.¹⁶ On beliefs and rites Durkheim argues, “The first are states of opinion and consist of representations; the second are fixed modes of actions. These two classes of phenomena differ as much as thought differs from action.”¹⁷ He denotes two types of rites (rituals or practices) that are developed by the collective in direct
relation with religious beliefs. Durkheim divides these into what he calls “negative cult” and “positive cult.” Describing the importance of understanding these elements, Durkheim writes:

Every cult presents two aspects: one negative, the other positive. In reality these two kinds of rites are closely associated; as we shall see, they presuppose one another. But they are different none the less, and we must distinguish between them, if only to understand their connections.\(^{18}\)

Negative cult has to do with that which is prohibited regarding the sacred. Durkheim argues that the sacred, by definition, exists in its discontinuity from the surrounding profane existence. Negative cult represents the rites that are in place to “bring about this crucial state of separation.”\(^{19}\) Furthermore, negative cult exists to “prevent one of the two domains from encroaching on the other, these rites can only decree abstentions, or negative acts.”\(^{20}\) These rites are established by a collective in order to sustain the purity of—and respect for—what is considered sacred. In their simplest form, these negative cult rites function on the principle that “the profane must not touch the sacred.”\(^{21}\) This negative cult can easily be seen in the area of the taboo. The priest and the layperson often have different restrictions on their ability to handle sacred things or approach sacred spaces. The layperson may be prohibited from touching or approaching the sacred in many of the ways that the priest touches or approaches the sacred. However, Durkheim concludes that the negative cult does not sufficiently explain all ritual behavior surrounding the sacred. He argues this point by explaining:

Man has never imagined that his duties toward religious forces could be reduced to a simple abstention from all involvement. He always thought that he maintained positive and bilateral relations with those forces, relations that are regulated and organized by a set of ritual practices. We shall call this special system of rites the positive cult.\(^{22}\)

What Durkheim refers to as positive cult is the system of practices that function in
order to establish and sustain interaction between humanity and the sacred. The sacrificial feast, song and dance, and group prayer are all examples of positive cult; that which uplifts and reaffirms the collective by organizing and regulating interaction with the sacred, which as we will see for Durkheim means primarily sustaining and uplifting the society itself. As previously mentioned, in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim focuses on totemic religion. He argues that a totem of a tribe or a clan is what is considered most sacred, and simultaneously this totem stands as a representation of the tribe or clan. Thus, for Durkheim, it is the collective itself that is the most sacred and that which is protected and sustained through both the negative and positive cult.

What happens to individuals when properly engaged in ritual practices of the positive cult—participants in communion with the sacred/each other—Durkheim calls this “collective effervescence.” Durkheim describes the individual’s experience of rituals of the positive cult and the power of effervescence in the following excerpt. He writes:

> It is not difficult to imagine that a man in such a state of exaltation no longer knows himself. Feeling possessed and led by some external power that makes him think and act differently from normal times, he naturally feels he is no longer himself. He seems to have become a new being: the decorations he dons and the masks he uses to cover his face give material form to this internal transformation even more than they induce it. And as all his companions feel transfigured in the same way at the same moment, and translate their feeling through shouts, gestures, and posture, it is as though he really were transported into a special world entirely different from the ordinary, a setting populated by exceptionally intense forces that invade and transform him…Therefore it is in these effervescent social settings, and from this very effervescence, that the religious idea seems to be born.23

Durkheim’s work aims at communicating the human need for a place among a collective. To that point, collective effervescence represents the successful unification of individuals to—and functioning of individuals within—a given society. As Durkheim
speaks of religion in this sense, “religion is above all a system of notions by which individuals imagine the society which they belong and their obscure yet intimate relations with that society.” What we have then—in review of Durkheim’s notions of beliefs, rituals, and the sacred within *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*—is the idea that individuals are in great need for a role in the ritual, a place at the table, and a communal reminder of a strong positive bilateral relationship with that which is sacred.

Religious studies scholars, interested in extending the term religion to encompass sport, often have made use of Durkheim’s analysis on rituals and collective effervescence. These concepts are easily observable in sport. Durkheim and Eliade are just two examples of theorist whose works on religion have been utilized to discuss sports as being religious. There are many more, but these two are noticeably widespread throughout the literature on sport as religion. Their concepts of the sacred, descriptions of how human beings interact with the sacred, and general definitions of religion have been commonly utilized for building arguments in favor of considering sport a form of religion.

**On the Other Hand**

While Eliade and Durkheim communicate concepts of religion that are often utilized by scholars arguing that sports are religious phenomena, it is not the case that Eliade and Durkheim have presented arguments on religion that are completely—and unquestionably—compatible with arguing that sport is a religious phenomenon. In relation to Eliade’s work, questions can be raised about how examples of the sacred in sport “reveal absolute reality” or “provide structure to the world.” Furthermore, with
Durkheim, sport’s ability to address moral concerns and develop “a moral community” can also be questioned. Not everyone is comfortable with utilizing such theories to welcome sport underneath the umbrella of religion. Joan Chandler makes this explicitly clear when she describes such efforts as robbing “the word ‘religion’ of the actual meaning it possesses for its practitioners.”

Similarly, Higgs and Braswell are much more interested in revealing a contrast between narrowly defined concepts of the sacred and the holy over making liberal use of the terms. Higgs and Braswell argue that “sports apologists do not hesitate to identify holy possibilities in sports in connection with ‘ultimacy,’ their main emphasis is upon sports as sacred, which from our perspective they confuse with the holy.” Definitions of terms such as sacred, holy, and more generally religion are now being revealed to be increasingly significant to the lines of argument surrounding sport as religion.

Theories often utilized by opponents of sport as religion typically make challenges to the inability of sport to provide an ontological and normative authority. The underlying charge is that sport does not speak to big questions surrounding the grand mysteries of life in the same manner as religion. Joan Chandler explains:

Sport has nothing whatever to do with such questions. While sport may provide us with examples of belief, ritual, sacrifice, and transcendence, all of them take place in a context wittingly and specifically by human beings, for the delight of human beings. Within that context, “chance,” “luck,” or “the fates” may be influential; players or fans may attempt to use magic to propitiate their gods. But sport per se cannot tell us where we came from, where we are going, nor how we are to behave while here; sports exists to entertain and engage us, not to disturb us with questions about our destiny.

These comments from Chandler reflect an understanding of religion that essentializes religion as a source of ontological and normative authority. Thus, for Chandler, a primary
function of religion is providing answers to the big mysteries of life and death. Why did the universe begin? What happens after death? What is the meaning of life? These questions, belong to the realm of religion. This concept of religion is much less conducive with the pursuit of claiming sport as a religion. In *An Unholy Alliance*, Higgs and Braswell repeatedly admit the reality of similarities between religion and sport. The authors provide a response to arguments that such comparisons should lead us to determine that sport is a religion. It is the defense of a narrow concept of the term holy, and their distinction between the holy—that which is “wholly other”—and the sacred that lies at the foundation of their critique. For Higgs and Braswell, it is not enough to constitute sport as a religion because of the presence of experiences within sport that are often categorized as sacred. The authors even concede that sport can be a setting for momentary glimpses of the holy, but that sport is not chiefly designed to connect its participants or spectators to the “wholly other.”

In the case of “the shot” and the numerous stories from individuals who witnessed Ty Roger’s now famous buzzer beater, Higgs and Braswell would remain unwilling to give credit to any claims of the religious nature of this example. While they might grant that highly emotionally charged moments do occur within the arena of sport, even such moments of powerful collective effervescence are not innately religious. Higgs and Braswell argue that lesser or co-opted concepts of the term “sacred” might be commonly applied to such experiences, but to confuse such moments as revelations of the holy or something innately religious is to mistakenly ascribe something “wholly other” to the realm of the secular or profane. Such arguments narrowing the scope of religion are not as conducive for the purposes of including sport as a religion.
At this point, it should be evident that the debate over including sport as a form of religion can be reduced to a debate over how to define religion. As observed in my review of material from scholars on both sides of this discussion, alongside the case of basketball in the state of Kentucky, the pivotal disagreements about sport’s qualifications as a religion are more centrally related to disagreements about the essence of religion than disagreements about the personal and communal influence of sport. Is basketball in Kentucky a religion? Can there be a religion of sport? Is sport a religious phenomenon?

All of these questions are very similar, and all have a commonality that makes them ultimately unanswerable. The term “religion” is simply too broad. The only possible answer to these questions is both yes and no.

Conclusion

In the first appendix to *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, Peter Berger explains his reasoning for choosing the definition of religion that he used in the development of his argument. He also provides comments on the relative utility of definitions, during which he specifically addresses definitions of religion. Much of what he has to say about disputes over definitions can be helpful for those interested in discussing the religion of sport. He writes:

Definitions cannot, by their very nature, be “true” or “false,” only more useful or less so. For this reason it makes relatively little sense to argue over definitions. If, however, there are discrepancies between definitions in a given field, it makes sense to discuss their respective utility… Actually, a good case can be made, at least in the field of religion, that even definitions based on patently erroneous presuppositions have had a measure of utility.28

What Berger is saying about definitions is crucial to the growing academic discussion.
of sport as religion. Whether or not sport should be classified as a religion is more precisely a debate over how to define religion. The tension primarily is between definitions of religion that emphasize observable phenomenon and definitions of religion that emphasize ontological and normative authority. The first group is representative of those scholars who argue for sport as a form of religion. The latter group is those who resist the notion that sport constitutes a religion. Considering the lack of consensus on the definition of religion within the field of religious studies, it should come as no surprise that the arguments of sport as a religious phenomenon have received split reviews. The fundamental question to this evolving dialogue will remain contingent upon definitions of religion. Is sport a religion? Is basketball in Kentucky a religion? The answer is both yes and no, depending on the meaning of the term religion.

Differences in methodology also create similar roadblocks to consensus on the religious or non-religious nature of sport. In the introduction of his book *The Meaning and End of Religion*, Wilfred Cantwell Smith provides a clear picture of the challenge to define religion across various approaches to the subject. He writes:

> The philosopher of religion has formulated interpretations that are at times penetrating and may be brilliantly conceived; but to them the historian of religion musters specific and stark exceptions. The historian of religion has offered descriptions that may be meticulously accurate as to detail; but in them the man of faith does not recognize the substance of that in which he is involved. The believer has propounded views that have the virtue of depth and genuineness; but they are relevant or intelligible to those within the same or similar tradition. The psychologist or sociologist has probed the externals or the aberrations of faith; but has missed the heart of the matter that has kept the externals living, or the norms from which the abnormal, perhaps all too readily, deviates. The insider knows something precious within the materials that he uses, but cannot assimilate the external truths about those materials that an observer has carefully ascertained and can convincingly document.²⁹

The approach a researcher takes to the study of religion often parallels with key
characteristics of that researcher’s definition of religion. Smith describes the study of religion as a “task of no mean proportions.” The conversation of religion and sport must endure the same difficulty. As emphasized by Smith, the religious insider, the psychologist, the sociologist, and historian are not going to speak of religion in the same way. Scholars interested in religion are invariably not going to be able to reach consensus on definitions of religion for numerous reasons. In many ways, the argument is at an impasse. Further maturation of the debate over sport as religion will necessitate emphasis on discussing sport religion with a high degree of openness as well as a persistent amount of attention to detail. This is a combination that is pivotal for the conversation on sport and religion, but a combination that is rarely observed in academic debate.

Previous scholarship in this area of study needed a theoretical emphasis and rigid tone. The process of validating this scholarly debate necessitated strong stances on extensive theoretical work both defending and/or resisting the notion that sport is religious. However, continued emphasis on theoretical conversations, at this point, will be more repetitive than helpful. The theoretical dividing lines of how to discuss sport and religion have already been clearly marked. Future work in this area needs to focus more on testing—over restating—theories that have already been established.

In summation, the study of sport and religion has produced compelling arguments for, and against, including sport under the umbrella of religious phenomenon. The nature of the debate between scholars on both sides of this discussion can be reduced to how variations in definitions of religion impact perceptions of sport. In order for the continued maturity of this conversation, scholars interested in discussing a religion of sport must be more diligent in seriously embracing objections to their stance on the subject. Also, there
is a distinct need to pursue alternative research methods in order to further diversify the scope of this discussion. In the conclusion, I further detail where approaches in this area of study should go next by providing concrete suggestions for future work in relation to the religious nature of sport.

Notes

2 Feezell, *Sport, Play, and Ethical Reflection*, 45.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid., 26.
9 Ibid., 30.
10 Ibid., 37.
11 Ibid., 25.
12 Ibid., 88.
15 Ibid., 43.
16 Ibid., 36.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid., 221.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid., 224.
22 Ibid., 243.
23 Ibid., 163–4.
24 Ibid., 170–1.
Conclusion – Adjusting the Game Plan

Though drastically oversimplified, I submit the following notes concerning the evolution of the argument in favor of discussing sport as a form of religion. Michael Novak’s work substantially broached the topic of sport as religion. Charles Prebish’s arguments codified the tenants of sport religion. Joseph Price challenged scholars to provide extensive work on examples of sport religion. Eric Bain-Selbo’s work, in step with Price’s challenge, provided extensive application of the argument of sport as religion in relation to a particular sport. Randolph Feezell’s work is helpful for discussing the argument for sport as a religious phenomenon, but ultimately this argument is not his focus. Still, Feezell’s ethical reflections on sport have encouraged further serious contemplation of sport.

This argument has had its detractors. Though substantial responses/critiques of sport religion are limited in number, compelling arguments have been made for the cause of resisting inclusion of sport to the realm of the religious. Joan Chandler accused any moves to include sport as religious phenomena as being moves that widened the concept of religion too broadly. Higgs and Braswell’s book challenged how scholars use—or misuse—key religious terms such as the sacred and the holy. Both arguments posited that the sport fails in any way to provide ontological and normative authority, which they understand as crucial to the function of religion.

What is to be gained or lost in this debate? Interpretations and re-interpretations of the term “religious” or “religion.” For Novak, Prebish, Price, and Bain-Selbo, to argue that sport is “religious” or a form of “religion” is an attempt to demonstrate the applicability of these terms to the types of experiences and influences that sport can have on human
beings. On the other hand, for Chandler, Higgs, and Braswell, to argue that sport is not “religious” or a form of “religion” is an attempt to protect or preserve these terms. As this debate can be reduced to a matter of definition, that which is to be gained or lost in this discussion is clarity on where these terms can apply.

This work has provided readers with a sense of the arguments on both sides of the discussion of the religion of sport. Also, this work demonstrated the relative utility of college basketball in Kentucky, by revealing its relation to arguments from both groups of scholars divided on this question of the religion of sport. Lastly, I have suggested that future work in the academic conversation on sport and religion needs to shift away from such rigid focus on proposing and defending theoretical frameworks of religion. Where do we go from here?

As stated in the previous chapter, there is a distinct need to pursue alternative research methods in order to further diversify the scope of this discussion. As the challenge to define religion has complicated the ability to add future work theorizing about sport as religion, scholars should look for ways to test these already entrenched and opposing concepts of religion in relation to sport. More ethnographic work highlighting the intersection of sport and religion could provide new or alternative evidence bases from which the conversation of sport as a religious phenomenon could find some renewal. Simple survey work and interviews with sports fans could prove very useful in understanding how religious sports fans, coaches, and players understand their experiences and devotion to both religion and sport.

In the closing pages of his book *Game Day and God: Football, Faith, and Politics in the American South*, Eric Bain-Selbo writes:
I suspect that most Americans who are religious do not think there is any great divide between their love of sports and their religious commitments. In my meetings with college football fans in the South, I talked with many very devout individuals who always were extremely devoted to their team. It may even be the case that the type of person who is energetic and passionate about religious life is the same type of person who has a similar experience with college football.¹

Here we find an area of investigation into the relationship of sport and religion that is ripe for serious research. Bain-Selbo’s suspicion that “most Americans who are religious do not think there is any great divide between their love of sports and their religious commitments”² should be tested thoroughly. Ethnographic work focused on traditionally religious sports fans, those who identify as both devoted to sports and religiously devout, could provide support or prove problematic for Bain-Selbo’s suspicion. But in either case such a research endeavor, centralized on qualitative interviews of traditionally religious sports fans, would satiate the charge from Joan Chandler: “What we have to decide is not whether sport shares many of the typical, even transcendental attributes of religion, but whether people who would consider themselves religious and people who are sports fans expect the object of their devotions to meet the same need.”³

While Eric Bain-Selbo and Joan Chandler are stalemated on their theoretical approaches to religion and sport, I argue that this dialectical gridlock could find renewed purpose with shifts away from debating definitions towards the utilization of an ethnographic approach to religion and sport. Survey work and interviews of sport fans could provide researchers with the opportunity to ask questions about how sports fans understand their devotion to both religion and sport. While some religious studies scholars have done limited survey work and participant observation analysis of sports fans, there has been no extensive work done that utilizes an ethnographic approach to the
intersection of sport and religion for the purposes of providing evidence to parallel and/or challenge the theoretical debate concerning sport as religion. This is the next step in the maturation process of this academic conversation.

To claim that this debate over the religious nature of sport can be reduced to a matter of variations in the definition of religion might appear on its surface as an overly simplistic and benign conclusion. The debate over whether sport is a religion or not, which is more precisely the analysis of sport’s qualifications for being considered a religion in relation to differing definitions, has reached its maximum potential. Thus, it is crucial for scholars interested in sport and religion to embrace this idea and seek to find alternative ways to research and discuss sport and religion.

Notes

2 Ibid.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


