

Review

The multi - dimensional relationship between religion and sport

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The paper defines religion and sport as social institutions which have engaged large portions of many societies. The functions of both are highlighted to include social bonding and interaction, promotion of integration as well as socialization. The relationship between religion and sport are reviewed from primitive societies to the reformation, the rise of Protestantism and industrial revolution. It is concluded that the symbiotic relationship between the two should be explored further, studying and exploring factors that may bring peace, unity and cohesion in the country. It is recommended that inter-denominational sports competitions should be encouraged to chart the course toward unity for our youths.

Key words: Institutionalized, supernatural, sacred, anthropomorphic, rituals, sport, religion, review.

INTRODUCTION

The paper explores the concepts of “religion” and “sport” and offers an analytic insight into their history, common lines of development and their inter-relations. Religion is the belief that supernatural forces influence human lives. Eitzen and Sage (1997) quoting Yinger (1957), a leading scholar in the sociology of religion, note that religion is “a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggle with those ultimate problems of human life. It is the refusal to capitulate to death, to give up in the face of frustration, to allow hostility to tear apart one’s human association.” Nelkin (2000) defines religion as a belief system that includes the ideas of the existence of an “eternal principle that has created the world; that governs it, that controls its destinies or that intervenes in the natural course of its history. She adds that the “eternal principle”, either God or “a powerful idea”, is understood as “the key to all knowledge, the explanation of history, and the guide to the conduct of everyday behaviour”. In the views of Barrett (2001), religion is “a social construct encompassing beliefs and collectively, to make some sense of the great questions of life and death.”

In his “Overview of Religion,” O’Neil (2009) defines religion as “a system of beliefs usually involving the worship of supernatural forces or beings.” To him, religious beliefs provide shape and meaning to one’s perception of the universe. In other words, they provide a sense of order in

what might otherwise be seen as a chaotic existence. According to him, religions also provide understanding and meaning for inexplicable events such as a loved one being killed in an earthquake or some other unpredictable force of nature.

From the foregoing definitions, the author sees religion as the belief in the existence and worship of a supreme power that controls our acts. On the other hand, sport is defined as “competitive human physical activity that is governed by institutionalized rules (Synder and Spreitzer, 1989).” Vander-Zwaag (1998) posits that “sport is a competitive physical activity, utilizing specialized equipment and facilities, with unique dimensions of time and space in which the quest for records is of high significance.” In line with these, Coakley (2001) opines that “sports are institutionalized competitive activities that involve rigorous physical exertion or the use of relatively complex skills by participants motivated by personal enjoyment and external rewards”. The broadest definition of sport is provided by Pitts et al. (1994) who believe that sport is any activity, experience, or business enterprise focused on fitness, recreation, athletics or leisure. They feel that sport does not have to be competitive, nor does it always require specialized equipment or rules. To them, sport includes activities such as working out, running and dancing.

As a social institution, religion functions to maintain and transmit beliefs about forces considered to be

supernatural and sacred. It provides codified rules for moral conduct and prescribes symbolic practices deemed to be in harmony with beliefs about the supernatural (Dressler, 1969). Social function as used here refers to the contributions that religion makes to the maintenance of human societies; the focus is on what religion does, with what it contributes to the survival and maintenance of societies and groups. Another function of religion is social integration. Religion promotes a binding together, both of the members of a society and of social obligations that help to unite them. Religious ceremonies and rituals also promote integration, since they serve to re-affirm some of the basic customs and values of society. Here, the societal customs, folkways, and observances are symbolically elevated to the realm of the sacred. This is very true of the African traditional religion.

Religion, according to Eitzen and Sage (1997), serves as a vehicle for social control. This implies that religious tenets constrain the behaviour of the community of believers to keep them in line with the norms, values, and beliefs of society. In all the major religions, there is an intertwining of religion and morals, and schemes of other worldly reward or punishment for behaviour, such as that found in Christianity, become a powerful force for morality, the fear of hell fire and damnation has been a powerful deterrent in the control of Christian societies. The virtues of honesty, conformity to sexual codes and all the details of acceptable moral behaviour in a society become merged with the religious beliefs and practices.

Smelser (1967) sees religion performing a "social structuration" function which means that religion tends to legitimize the secular social structures within a society. There is a strong tendency for religious ideology to become united with the norms and values of secular structures, producing, as a consequence, religious support for the values and institutions of society. From its earliest existence, religion has provided rationales that serve the needs and actions of leaders. It has been legitimized as "God-given" such disparate ideologies as absolute monarchies and democratic forms of government. Moreover, when obedience to the social agents of control is interpreted as a religious duty and disobedience is interpreted as sinful, this social function of religion is well served.

Sport, on the other hand, also plays a significant role of socialization, which according to Kane (2003) is the various ways in which a society's dominant values, attitudes and beliefs are passed down from generation to generation. Another function of sport is the unification of a people. Sport can bring people together by giving them a sense of personal identity, as well as feelings of group membership and social identification (Coakley, 2001).

Sports according to Ball (1972) can also be used to ignite the flame of nationalism and patriotism. Success in international sports competition tends to trigger pride among that nation's citizens. For instance, the Olympics and other international games tend to promote an "us vs.

them" feeling among athletes, coaches, politicians, the press and fans. It can be argued then that the Olympic Games represent a political contest, a symbolic world war in which nations win or lose. Because this interpretation is commonly held, citizens of the nations involved unite behind their flag and their athletes. Athletes who do not show proper respect for the flag or for the national anthem are subject to stiff penalties. A typical example was when Tommie Smith and John Carlos were stripped of their medals by the Olympic Committee when during the victory ceremony they lowered their heads and raised their black-gloved clenched fists as the US national anthem was being played (Kane, 2003).

Sport is also used as a mobility escalator. The most obvious way in which sports participation facilitates upward social mobility is when a person from a low socioeconomic background becomes wealthy and famous because of his athletic ability. This happens in almost all sports (except those more exclusively upper classes such as polo, yatching and to a large extent, golf). Most typically, it occurs in boxing and probably soccer in Nigeria where the athletes are recruited almost exclusively from the lower socioeconomic levels.

It seems apparent that few (if any) institutions have the ability of bringing people together the way sport does. This is primarily because the popularity of sports cuts across race, social class, gender and age barriers. Nigerians, irrespective of education, occupation, tribe or religion, unite to back the national football team (the Super Eagles) once there is any major competition. The quest to qualify for the 2010 World Cup in South Africa is a case in point in the efficacy of sport as a unifier of a people. In spite of all the brouhaha in the country courtesy of deregulation of the downstream sector of the oil industry, the 8th All Africa Games "Abuja 2003" brought the nation together in unison to support Team Nigeria (Jeroh, 2008).

Based on the foregoing functions, Lee (2004) argues that religion and sport can be seen as two major institutions that influence the social landscape in the lives of many. In line with this, Eitzen and Sage (1997) proposed that religious values are inherent in sport ideology. In this sense, Lee (2004), quoting Bryant and McElroy, (1997) points out that sport embodies religious values including character development, hard work, and per-severance, and like religion, it promotes and inculcates these qualities and behaviours. Thus, it can be inferred that there is a reciprocal relationship between religion and sport.

THE CHANGING RELATIONSHIP OF SPORT AND RELIGION

The relationship between religion and sport is discussed from a historical perspective to gain an insight into how both have influenced and intertwined with each other.

Both have become major sources of power, identity, entertainment and community building institutions. Sport may influence our lives to the point that we experience radical change, similar to how religion can affect us. There are “proverbs” of sport such as “champions are made, not born” that become engrained in a sports fan’s memory just as proverbs from the Bible, for example, “whatsoever a man sows, that he shall also reap” do in a Christian mind. Islam, according to Sheikh’ (2011) stresses the importance of spiritual and moral training that should accompany physical training so that the latter yields its desired effects.

The Four “C’s (creed, code, cultus and community) which provide a basis for studying religion also heavily pertain to the world of sports (Prebish, 1992). Creed is an authoritative statement of belief made by the group. Sports, organized or not, professional or amateur, invoke a two-part creed-winning is generally considered to be the most important aspect of sports and competition. Success is not achieved through losing. Hard work, dedication, and perseverance are the main contributors to athletic prowess. Religion is also expressed in codes which are statements of rules that govern the behaviour of the group. In sports, codes exist to show how athletes and fans alike are to conduct themselves. The cultus is an aggregate of the ritual forms in a religious setting. Extremely important to sport culture is the cultus. Rituals themselves seem to celebrate various sporting achievements and are used to recognize the competition as a whole. Tennis players meet at the net to shake hands after a match. After soccer games, players shake hands and often exchange jerseys with members of the opposing team. These rituals and traditions are comparable to religions customs such as holding a ceremony to recognize confirmation, and having communion to focus us on the centrality of the relationship between the believer and Christ. Sports also appear in Islamic rituals. The rituals of pilgrimage, paying visits to Muslim brothers, visiting the sick, going to and fro the mosque and participating in many social activities are no more than sports. The last “C”, the community, can be thought of in different ways within sports. A community is established when there is closeness between a team and its fans. Supporters feel welcome in their community, and feel a common bond with those around them and identify with the athletes.

Primitive societies and the ancient Greeks

In primitive societies, athletic activities began as religious rituals. “Its roots were in man’s desire to gain victory over foes seen and unseen, to influence the forces of nature, and to promote fertility among his crops (Brasch, 1970).” Eitzen and Sage (1997) posit that the Zuni Indians of New Mexico played games which they believe would bring rain and thus enable their crops to grow. This is not

different from the new yam festivals in most parts of Eastern Nigeria. Traditional religion and sport have had an interesting and interconnected relationship.

Dance, an aspect of sport, is widely used by the Urhobos in Delta State, Nigeria, in the worship of gods and goddesses that inhabit the cosmos (Ojaide, 2011).

According to him, there is no worship of any god or goddess in Okpe land that does not make use of dance. The “Okpes” believe that the ways of the gods are far removed from the ways of mortal men and that every effort is made by the supplicant to properly communicate with the gods. Thus they dance before the gods to celebrate victory, to placate the anger of the gods, to solicit for help, for the healing of both mind and body. Such dances include Igbe-ame (performed by the Igbe religious sect) and Oghene - Uku dance (performed by a religious sect). All these dances have their place in the religious life of the people.

On the other hand, (Ojaide, Tanure <http://www.urhobo.net> retrieved on 23/8/11) asserts that different Urhobo clans have festivals to exorcise evil spirits for communal health and property and in such festivals, the Udu and Ughievwen people resort to udje and stilt dances.

The ancient Greeks worshipped beauty and entwined religious observance with their athletic demonstrations in such a way that it is difficult to define where one left off and the other began. Greek gods were anthropomorphic and sculptors portrayed them as physical specimens, to be both admired and emulated by their worshippers. The strong anthropomorphic conceptions of gods held by the Greeks led to their belief that gods took pleasure in the same things as mortals - music, drama and display of physical excellence. The gymnasium located in all the nooks and crannies of the Greek city for all male adults provided facilities and a place for sports training as well as for discussions of intellectual topics. There were also facilities for religious worship as an altar and a chapel was located in the centre of each gymnasium.

The most important athletic meetings of the Greek according to Eitzen and Sage (1997) were part of religious festivals. The Olympic games which began in 776 B.C. were held in honour of Zeus, the king of Greek gods. The Pythian games were festivals held in honour of Apollo. According to them, victorious athletes presented their gifts of thanks upon the altar of the god or gods whom they thought to be responsible for their victory. A Roman emperor, Theodosius, proscribed these games in 395 A.D. because as a Christian, he felt the games were tinted with paganism and had to be abolished to suppress paganism in favour of Christianity (McIntosh, 1963).

The early Christian church

Religious support for sport found no counterpart to the Greeks in Western society until the beginning of the 20th

century. The Roman Catholic Church dominated society in Western Europe from 400 A.D. until the Reformation in the 16th century, and since then, Roman Catholicism has shared religious power with other churches.

At first, opposing Roman sport spectacles, such as chariot racing, gladiatorial shows tinted with paganism and brutality, the Christians eventually came to regard the human body as an instrument of sin. The early Christians did not view sports as evil per se for the Apostle Paul wrote approvingly of the benefits of physical activity. Sport at its best is not religion but derives its highest values from religion. Consider the following texts:

- i. "Surely you know that many runners take part in a race, but only one of them wins the prize. Run, then, in such a way as to win the prize (1 Corinthians 9: 24)."
- ii. "I have done my best in the race. I have run the full distance, and have kept the faith (2 Timothy 4: 7)".
- iii. "As for us, we have this large crowd of witnesses round us. So then, let us rid ourselves of everything that gets in the way, and of the sin which holds on to us so tightly, and let us run with determination the race that lies before us (Hebrews 12: 1)."

In each case, St. Paul was exhorting Christians to use their physical gifts, literally and metaphorically, for religious aims. What the early Christians abhorred was the paganism prominent in the Roman sport events.

The reformation, the rise of Protestantism and industrial revolution

The Reformation of the early 16th century signaled the end of the grip that Roman Catholicism had on the minds and habits of the people of Europe. With this religious conversion, coupled with the teaching of Martin Luther and John Calvin, one would have thought that the pejorative view of sports might have perished but Protestantism paraded the seeds of a new asceticism and Calvinism imported to England in its Puritan form became a greater opposition to sports than the Puritans.

There were a number of reasons for Protestant prejudice toward play and sport. One prominent objection was that participation would detract attention away from spiritual matters. There was also the belief that play and its resultant pleasure might become addictive because of the inherent weakness of human nature.

With the Industrial Revolution sweeping across Europe, things began to change for the better for sports. Social problems such as health became a concern for social reformers beginning in the 1830s, many of whom were clergy and intellectual leaders. Social conditions had begun to change rapidly under the aegis of Industrialization. The population shifted from rural residence to urban, labour changed from daylong agricultural toil to toil for wages under squalid working and living conditions.

The physical health of the population became a major problem, leading a number of reformers to propose that people would be happier, more productive and have better health if they engaged in vigorous sport activities. Surprisingly, some of the leading advocates of play and sport were clerics who presented forceful arguments from their pulpits that physical prowess and sanctity were not incompatible (Eitzen and Sage, 1997). The argument was that widespread participation in sports would make for a more physically fit citizenry, as well as create a more exciting environment.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELIGION AND SPORT

Though there are differing views on the matter of sport and religion's involvement with each other, it should be apparent that sport and religion do have various common bonds (Lee, 2004). The association of sport and religion, as further asserted by Lee (2004) "can be found in nearly every part of the sports world".

Just as Christianity recognizes sports, even to professionalization, so also is Islam. Muslims are commanded to be of sound bodies and sound minds in addition to having sound morals. To them "a strong believer is better and more beloved to Allah than a weak one". A sound strong body is capable of fulfilling both the religious and the worldly duties. Islam never accepts anything that leads to neglecting these duties, except in some cases where some exemptions are made so as to make matters easy for believers (Sheikh, 2011; Atiyya Saqr. <http://www.ams-sa.org/acticles/58-sports/79> retrieved on 05/08/11). According to him, Islam rejects all games and sports that stir sexual urge or encourage moral perversion such as women practicing dancing and being watched by the public. Islam also does not allow matches or games that involve both sexes, in a way that opens channels for seduction, temptation and corruption. Males are to practice sports that suit their nature and vice-versa. In Islam, it is not allowed for females to practice sports that are unique for men. These injunctions probably explain the absence of Muslim girls in the National Female Football Teams (The Super Falcons and the Falconets).

Judaism also encourages sport but for a Jew embarking upon a career of high-level participation in sports, the major obstacle is Sabbath observance. In Israel, whether or not Shabbat is a key day for competition (as it is for soccer, swimming and tennis), the day is utilized heavily for training by all branches of sports (Weinberger, 2010). He avers that playing professional sport on Shabbat might not violate any of the 39 prohibited activities codified by the rabbis, but certainly it would seem to violate the spirit of the biblical commandment that says in part: "you shall not do any work." Some religious Jews are not prepared to be flexible with the definition of "work," and relatively early in their sports

careers, they rule out Sabbath sports play – and, in doing so, decide against a career in professional sport. He opines that in practice, religious Jews in Israel are usefully underrepresented in the elite corridors of Israeli sports. As one who believes in the benefits of sports he concludes that “I only can look on with envy at religious Christian professional athletes in America”.

Lee (2004) opines that a religious scholar Charles Prebish (1992) claims that it is both necessary and expected to look at the newest revolution in sport, the growing relationship of religion and sport. The relationship can be seen through the “use” of sport by religion and the “use” of religion by sport (Coakley, 2001; Eitzen and Sage, 1997). Each of these concepts is addressed thus.

Religion uses sport

From a position of strong opposition to recreation and sport activities, the church has made a complete turn-around or reversal within the past century. The church now heartily supports these activities as effective tools to promote “the Lord’s work”. Eitzen and Sage (1997) aver that religion has utilized sport through churches, religious leaders, church affiliated institutions and various religious organizations that are centered on sport.

The prevalence of sports relationship with religion can be seen in the form of various organizations that have been centered on linking sport and religion. Lee, (2004). Previous studies (Aitken, 1992; Coakley, 2001; Eitzen and Sage, 1997; Hoffman, 1992; Hubbard, 1998; Ladd and Mathisen, 1999) have shown that groups such as Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) and Athletes in Action (AIA) are among the various commonly found organizations. Lee (2004) adds that the joint union between sport and religion has also taken place through use of sport by quasi-religious institutions. Among such movements have been the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), Catholic Youth Organization (CYO) (Kraus, 1984; Ladd and Mathisen, 1999).

Church leaders and churches use sport

Religious leaders making use of sport have also become quite common (Lee, 2004). A notable religious figure promoting the virtue of sports is Oral Roberts, the founder of Oral Roberts University. When establishing his university in 1965, one of his first actions was the establishment of an athletic programme to bring recognition and prestige to the university. With respect to the programme Roberts was quoted as saying:

Athletics is part of our Christian witness... Nearly every-man in America reads the sports pages, and a Christian

school cannot ignore these people... Sports are becoming the Number 1 interest of people in America. For us to be relevant, we had to gain the attention of millions of people in a way that they could understand (Eitzen and Sage, 1997).

Additionally, scholars (Atcheson, 1994; Coakley, 2001; Kerrigan, 1992; Ladd and Mathisen, 1999; Prebish, 1992) have pointed out that Reverend Billy Graham and Pope John Paul II have been strong proponents of sport and physical activity through encouraging the promotion of sport activities in the lives of their followers (Lee, 2004).

In contemporary Nigerian society, we are aware of the contributions of Christian mission and Islamic schools to the pool of sportsmen/women who had represented the country in international sports competitions.

St. Finbarr’s College, Akoka, Lagos, a Catholic mission school, is credited with producing star footballers such as Henry Nwosu and Stephen Keshi who at various times captained the Super Eagles. Another Catholic school – St. Gregory’s College, Lagos, produced the likes of Franklin Howard. The Anglicans are not left out as late Sydney Asiodu, a prolific sprinter and footballer came from Igbobi College, Yaba, Lagos. Dr. Bruce Ijirigho, an Olympic 400 m runner is a product of Holy Trinity College, Sabo- gida, Ora in Edo State. Modupe Oshikoya is a product of Methodist Girls High School, Yaba. Haruna Ilerika and Tunde Disu are products of Ansar – ud – Deen Grammar School, Lagos. The list is endless (Jeroh, 2011).

Churches also use sport

By recognizing that the American society is highly sport oriented, many churches and church organizations understandably look for ways to meet these interests (Morrow and Morrow, 1986). Churches provide sport opportunities including church leagues and tournaments, as well as various other sport, fitness and recreation programme activities (Lee, 2004). In Nigeria, the Bendel Province of the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) has blazed the trail and is very much alive in soccer competition for the youths which started two years ago. Fortunately, the Warri Diocese which was the runner up in the maiden edition in 2009 became the champion in the 2011 edition recently concluded at the Oghara Township Stadium. Congratulations to Warri Diocese.

In line with the purposes of church sport, Lee (2004), while quoting (Drinkford, 1996; and Eitzen and Sage, 1997) opines that churches have used sports for functions such as evangelism, fellowship, church growth and discipleship. It is in view of this that Hartzell (1996) notes that the involvement of sport activities can serve as a means of catching the interest of many un-churched people that might generally be reluctant to attend church, but may be much more open to sport.

Sport uses religion

In addition to the aforementioned uses of sport by religion, Lee (2004) argues further that there are also variety of ways in which sport makes use of religion. That is why Eitzen and Sage (1997) opine that religion can be used to help coaches and athletes deal with stressful situations. For example, utilizing religious practices has been commonly implemented by coaches as a means of supplementing practical athletic techniques.

Prayer activity has been found throughout professional sport, collegiate sport, interscholastic sport and even youth sport (Lee, 2004). Prayer is perhaps most frequently used by athletes. Quoting Eitzen and Sage (1997), Lee (2004) gives examples of issues often requested for in prayer to include protection, good performance and victory in competition. The uses of prayer have taken place in a variety of contexts as well. Some individuals see prayer as a means for being able to build unity and cohesion. Others may see prayer as being more of a ritual. An example of such can be seen when some individuals recite the Lord's Prayer as a form of team ritual. Another example for prayer use is as a means for dealing with the uncertainties that are part of sport. Furthermore, some have used prayer as a vehicle for bringing forth God's intervention.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The importance of physical fitness in true and undiluted worship of God cannot be overemphasized. Religion and sport have a symbolic relationship that should be judiciously explored to bring peace, unity and cohesion in the institution. It does not, however, constitute an alternative to or substitute for formal sacred religious involvement. Unlike the Christian faith, sport does not provide a central figure, God who forgives us, loves us and helps us to understand our existence and to comprehend the meaning of it.

Sports may replicate some of the intensity, and some of the devotion of religious experience, but there seems no way for sports to offer the sustained comfort and direction that comes from leading a God - centered life in the community. In sport, as in religion, there are heroes and heroines who provide models for the performance to be strived for, who are admired for what they did, becoming almost saint like. Such is the religious nature of sport (Siedentop, 1990).

Both religion and sport have been seen to unite their adherents. Unity is a must for any nation that wants development. Consequent upon the unification functions of both religion and sport, the author believes that this relationship can be built upon to foster peace and unity in Nigeria. It is thus recommended that the Christian denominations and Islamic organizations or groups should as a matter of urgency organize competitions in various sports among themselves at diocesan, provincial or zonal

basis as the case may be. At the end of such preliminary competitions, teams selected will now compete against themselves from where state teams can be selected to compete at the national level. The Muslims should be encouraged to do same as the Christians and at the end, there should be competitions in various sports between Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and Muslim Organizations. It is the considered view of the author that this will go a long way to chart the course of unity for the ever restive youths and this will be very good for Nigerians.

It is also suggested that studies that can bring about the much desired unity by religion and sport be carried out. Probably, the fratricidal war in Jos and Bokoharamism in the northern parts of Nigeria can be brought under control through the interface between religion and sport.

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