

Religion in Five Minutes

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Can sports be a religion?

Russell T. McCutcheon

The simple answer is: Sure, why not?

Although a more complicated (and thus misleadingly brief) answer would be: It all depends.

On what? By this point in the book the answer might already be obvious: the definition of religion you use, of course—which means that it all depends to whom you're posing the question.

Broadly speaking, there are two types of definitions that people commonly use to define something as religion: substantive and functionalist. While the former identifies what someone might take to be key or necessary features that one would expect to find when looking at a religion, such as belief in a god (the feature most people presume to be essential when it comes to seeing something as religious), the latter focuses on the wider role something plays, the purpose it serves, or the effect that it has. While the former approach may have a commonsense ring to it, and thus is often favored in popular discourses on religion (from people chatting in shops to news magazine headlines) the latter approach tends to be more prominent in scholarship; so, for example, while going to a baseball game might not strike someone attending church as being very religious, someone affectionately talking about 'the church of baseball'—as one of the lead characters in *Bull Durham* (1988) phrases it in the film's opening—might make a lot of sense to a scholar interested in the function such events play in wider social life.

Classically speaking, there were social functionalists and psychological functionalists—Émile Durkheim, a French scholar

from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, comes to mind as an example of the former while Sigmund Freud, from roughly the same era, certainly counts as an instance of the latter. While I wouldn't want to limit functionalism to just these two examples, these at least help us think through the question, since the seemingly obvious, even intuitive, boundary between what is and what isn't religion is not as clear when they're our guides. For although, let's say, football matches in Europe, or that other game called football in North America, obviously are not religion—at least when judged from a substantive point of view that, for instance, expects to see belief in a powerful, moral, and timeless being who loves us and controls the universe—following Durkheim's or Freud's lead means that we won't be so quick to dismiss the crowds, the chants, the players, the mascots, and the rules and traditions associated with the game, when it comes to asking if they're religious. For if the function of religion is to unite a disparate collection of people into a coherent group by means of their participation in a system of interconnected beliefs and practices that are focused on a basic distinction between things that are safe, allowed, and thus sanctioned, from those that are dangerous, disallowed, and thus illegitimate (which is just a slight tweak on how Durkheim famously wrote about the sacred/profane distinction that we commonly associated with things religious), then the opening question isn't so easily answered in the negative—as some might be inclined to answer it, at least on first glance. Or, again, if we understand religion as a culturally accepted social convention that individuals each use to vent and thereby express (always in a strategically coded, and thus disguised, fashion) their own natural, individual desires that, at least in everyday life, are usually thwarted, or in the least, managed, by the larger groups of which they're members (which is pretty much how Freud understood the role played by religion, among such other things as dreams or what we call Freudian slips), then fans clutching their hot dogs and jeering an opponent can be seen in a rather new light. For in both cases (that is, adopting either Durkheim's social theory or Freud's psychoanalytic approach) the simple phrase 'We won!' is

evidence of significant social and psychological work being done, whereby not just ideas of us/them and win/lose have been created and reinforced during the match but the curious identification of fans with the members of the team has been solidified; for although only the latter actually played the game the former feels equally victorious—and it is the creation and expression of this feeling, this internalization of victory and superiority (at least when your team wins; surprisingly deep depression and anger often greet a loss) that prompts some scholars of religion to find in sport features that strike them as very familiar from their studies of religion. And so it's not just when fans might pray for their team to win or when players engage in little rituals and lucky charms to ensure a good performance; for the very institution of sports, as an site that plays a crucial role in our larger society, could be argued to accomplish precisely what mosques, synagogues, churches, and temples do as discrete institutions at yet other social sites—all being places where group members form lasting identifications with each other, address and moderate individual idiosyncrasies that potentially undermine larger group interests, reinforce a set of rules that allow them to distinguish good from bad and acceptable from unacceptable, all of which makes it possible to distinguish themselves in seemingly stark terms from those who follow other rules, identify with other totems, and thus those who are seen as crosstown rivals.

So can sports be a religion? You tell me the next time you see the wave start up at a stadium filled with thousands of people who are otherwise complete strangers or a fan clad in the team's emblems crying in joy after a nail-biting big win.

About the author

Russell T. McCutcheon is professor and chair of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Alabama; his work is on the theories of religion, approaches to the study of myth, as well as focusing on the history of the study of religion and the practical effects of classification systems.

Suggestions for further reading

In this book

See also Chapters 1 (ubiquity of religion), 3 (classifying religion), 12 (function of religion), and 14 (spiritual but not religious).

Elsewhere

Bain-Selbo, Eric. *Game Day and God: Football and Politics in the American South*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2012.

Bain-Selbo, Eric and D. Gregory Sapp. *Understanding Sports as a Religious Phenomenon*. London: Bloomsbury, 2016.

Chidester, David. *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2005.

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