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Towards a Theology of Sport: A Proposal

This article seeks to understand sport in light of the Christian doctrine of creation. It does so by highlighting first a systematic connection between the ontology of the creature and the reality of play. Within this framework, sport is then argued to be the ritual celebration of *contingency*, a ritualised way in which we chime with the non-serious nature of our being. As a result, I propose that sport – though distinct from the Christian act of worship – needs to be accorded a rightful place within the life of the Sabbath-shaped creature.

Introduction

Sport is extremely popular. Consider the Olympics. In Beijing, in 2008, over 11,000 athletes from over 200 nations competed in over 300 events, with around 5 billion people – over two thirds of the world's population! – watching at least some of the events on television. With the forthcoming London games generating similar levels of interest, how are Christians to make sense of sport's popularity?

A ready-made answer to this question is difficult to come by. This is because hardly any Christian theologians engage with the question of sport. Their apparent lack of interest could stem from some deeply held suspicions, suspicions that can be traced to the first few centuries of the church's life when Church leaders forbade Christians from participating in the sports of their day on the basis of sport's idolatrous nature. Theodore of Mopsuestia – to take one example – argued that sports are propagated by the Devil and therefore to be avoided at all costs. ¹ Such suspicion has been evident on many other occasions. In the fourteenth century, for instance, Pope Clement V proclaimed that any Christian who attended the popular jousting tournaments would face excommunication, whilst, in the seventeenth century, the English Puritans fiercely opposed any sporting activity, with John Bunyan's famous conversion being from the sins of cricket to the devout piety of the Christian life. Though strict prohibition has regularly wavered, Shirl Hoffman – in a panoramic account of Christianity's relation to sport – rightly identifies the negative shape to the church's overall posture: initial uneasiness, followed by banishment, softened by interludes of pragmatic co-option. ²

The church's overarching – and at best – ambivalent attitude towards sport is fuelled in part by its deep seated belief that sport is somehow tied up with idolatrous worship. This belief needs to be understood in context. The ancient sporting contests in Greece, for example, had always been understood as sacred festivals which prized physical prowess, with popular events being bracketed by lavish sacrifices. This is why the Christian Emperor cited pagan idolatries when banning the Olympics in 351. ³ As Allen Guttman has argued in his encyclopaedic history of sport, ancient cultures invariably 'embedded [sports] within...religious ritual'. ⁴ In short, sport always served to placate the gods, thereby encouraging communal health, fertility, rainfall and the like. ⁵ Guttman is able to trace this thread forward, through to the Roman games of the first centuries, showing that they too wove religious reality into sport. Their gladiatorial contests 'were inextricably implicated in paganism', as were – in turn – the vast circuses that replaced them. ⁶ Other cultures were no different. In ancient China, India and the Americas, sporting activity was incorporated into

religious ceremony, with the original version of football – to take one example – being an attempt to align heaven to earth through the harmonious representation of the Chinese Zodiac. Given such heritage, it is easier to understand why the early Christians were suspicious about sport. ⁷

Acting out these suspicions, Christians first looked to break the link between sport and true religion, thereby drawing a sharp distinction between their worship and the hybrid practices of the surrounding cultures. Early records reveal how Christians were not to venerate God as part of – or through – sporting activity, a move whose original oddity is somewhat lost to view today. ⁸ Nevertheless, this sharp distinction between sport and worship was quickly established. Laying aside the exceptional work of the Dean of Auxerre – who in the twelfth century initiated an unusual ball game into the cathedral's Easter liturgy – sport has never become a formal act of devotion. Simply put, the church refuses to baptize sport in this way. Sport is not a form of worship suitable for Christians. ⁹

Now, if these introductory comments capture – even in part – the relationship between Christianity and sport then they bring to light certain features which need to be addressed in this article. First, despite the church's constant suspicion, sport is 'a human universal, appearing in every culture, past and present'. ¹⁰ Second, sport does have a pagan heritage, being strongly linked to the worship of the gods in and through the power of nature. For whatever reason, sport and spirituality are somehow woven together, again a trend that continues to this day. ¹¹ Third, the church has consistently decoupled its worship from sport, always refusing to synthesize the two and thereby distinguishing itself sharply from alternative cultures. Christian worship is always non-sporting. As a result, if these three features characterize the relationship – again, even in part – between Christianity and sport, a Christian theology of sport will need to make sense of each in turn. It will need (1) to honour the church's sharp distinction between sport and worship, (2) 'redeem' the historical connection between sport and what we might call the spirituality of nature-worship, and (3) explain the consistent popularity of sport. Somewhat ambitiously, this article endeavours to meet this threefold challenge.

To that end, I will first draw a working definition of sport out of analytic debates in the philosophy of play. Having done so, this working definition will be run alongside the Christian doctrine of creation. This doctrinal shift will signal the start of a developing rationale for the popularity of sport by systematically linking it to the ontology of the creature. In the closing section of the essay, I will build on this connection to offer a constructive proposal for understanding the popularity of sport in distinction from both pagan and Christian forms of worship. The result: a radically non-instrumental account of sport in which it is defined as the ritual celebration of contingency, an appropriate – yet radically distinct – complement to the Christian act of worship.

Towards a definition of sport

What then is sport? In answering this question, we attempt a definition. Definitions usually identify a subject by pinpointing its basic qualities through a process of locating it within a broader category and then specifying its distinguishing features. Following this approach, we can first place sport within a wider class, and this wider class is play though this only pushes the problem back a notch. This is because play is very difficult to define, but not altogether

impossible. It can be understood as a natural activity, seemingly enjoyed by both humans and animals. 12 Being natural, play could serve a biological function, being a necessary – almost mechanical – means to a physical end. For example, it could be the way animals train their young, functioning as an instinct educator, or, instead, a means by which we discharge excess energy, a safety valve which releases dangerous, pent-up emotions. 13 However, the philosopher Johan Huizinga identifies a problem with such approaches:

All these [explanations]... have one thing in common: they all start from the assumption that play must serve something which is not play, that it must have some kind of biological purpose... [And as] a rule they leave the primary quality of play, as such, virtually untouched. To each and every one of... [these] 'explanations' it might well be objected: 'so far so good, but what actually is the fun of playing?' 14

In pursuit of the fun of playing, Huizinga distinguishes play from all other aspects of life. Unlike more essential features – such as our eating, drinking, sleeping and work – Huizinga argues that play is unnecessary; that is to say, people play because they want to, not because they have to. 15 Play is therefore marked out from all other activities by being distinguished in both locality and duration – a 'playground' and a 'playtime', so to speak – effectively 'bounded', as Huizinga puts it. Such bounding is achieved with lines, markers, costume and kit, or sometimes simply with (an unspoken) '*imagine as if*'. 16 Such determination creates – what the philosopher Roger Caillois calls – 'a pure space', 17 which is itself constituted by the internal rules of play, freely embraced by the participants and allowing creative expression within artificial constraint. Play therefore is never chaotic or senseless; instead, order and chance combine to give purpose to unnecessary yet meaningful actions.

With these insights in mind – and providing what Robert K. Johnston deems the 'most widely used description of play' – Huizinga concludes: 18

[Play is] a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious', but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained from it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. 19

In other words – and as Jürgen Moltmann argues – play 'is meaningful within itself but... it must appear useless and purposeless from an outside point of view'. 20 For example, consider the game of American football on which Peter Heinegg comments:

Football... makes no sense pragmatically speaking. Certainly nothing could be more absurd than to hire a small army of godlike brutes, gifted with fantastic speed, strength, grace and coordination, to advance a leather ball down a gridiron. 21

This is to suggest that sport cannot be rationalized – that is, made sense of – by setting it to serve an outside purpose; it is not pragmatic but instead radically 'superfluous', 22 as Huizinga puts it, serving nothing outside itself, a point Caillois is keen to underline through a series of negatives:

A characteristic of play... is that it creates no wealth or goods, thus differing from work or art. At the end of the game, all can and must start over again at the same point. Nothing has been

harvested or manufactured, no masterpiece has been created, no capital has accrued. Play is an occasion of pure waste: waste of time, energy, ingenuity, skill, and often of money... 23

This is not to deny that play has consequences, some beneficial, some harmful. 24 It is instead to say that such consequences do not constitute the 'end' of the game itself; they are always subsidiary because play remains irreducibly free, with no end product or purpose beyond itself. To put this in technical terms: play is essentially autotelic, and can therefore be defined as a radically self-contained, unnecessary-yet-meaningful activity.

If so of play, what then of sport? First, by identifying it as a subspecies of unnecessary-yet-meaningful play, Guttmann marks out sport's distinguishing features. He first divides play into two broad types, that which is spontaneous and that which is regulated. 25 Spontaneous play is impulsive and underdetermined, arising unexpectedly, voluntarily and unannounced; such as when a child skims a stone across the surface of a lake. 26 In contrast to such spontaneity, regulated play is determined by its clear rules, which are freely embraced and become the means by which play is turned into games. Games can then be divided, this time along the line of competition. Some games – Guttmann notes, for example, 'leapfrog' – do not produce a winner; whilst others, such as tennis, do. Games that do produce winners are known as contests, and within such contests, Guttmann makes a final distinction: some contests are settled on the basis of physical prowess, whilst others, such as chess – though not devoid of a physical aspect – measure the players' intellect. As a result, tracing these distinctions within play, Guttmann defines sport as an 'autotelic physical contest', a distinct form of unnecessary yet meaningful play. 27 Here we have a working definition of sport.

However, even if we accept Guttmann's definition of sport, we still have much to do if we are to make sense of it theologically. To begin that process, we need to take a different sounding, shifting away from the work of philosophers to examine the Christian doctrine of creation.

Reading sport through the Christian doctrine of creation

Christians believe that God created the world 'out of nothing' (ex nihilo). 28 It is important to recognise that 'nothing' is not some kind of a 'thing' from which God fashions the world. This means, in eternity, only God.

Two important points complement this claim. First, God's act of creating is radically free. In eternity, God was not compelled to create. God is perfect, complete in himself, with no deficiency which creation is needed to fix. God is not 'lonely' or 'bored' and so in need of a world. This means that 'nothing' is not only not some kind of a 'thing' it is also not some kind of a 'need'. Or, put more positively, God is not 'needy' because – as the Church came to confess at Nicaea in 325 – the creator God is the eternal communion of three persons-in-relation, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. 29 Thus, on the basis of the Trinity, we can say that God did not need to create in order to be in 'company' because there is, so to speak, 'otherness' within God as the eternal event of giving and receiving of persons-in-relation. And just so, by extension: when the triune God created, he created freely, without necessity or compulsion. Simply put, creation – from beginning to end – is grace.

A second theological implication stems directly from this. Because God did not need to create, the 'thing' God creates has an integrity in itself. 30 The world is created 'out of

nothing', which is another way of saying that it is not made 'out of God'. The creation is not some broken-off piece of 'God-stuff', so to speak, nor is it made from some co-eternal 'matter' that God found lying around beside himself. Instead, 'out of nothing' implies that God freely summons a world into existence and this world – as Robert Jenson argues – is creaturely from top to bottom: the creation has its own freedom distinct from God; it is ontologically 'secular', if you like. [31](#)

Now, if creaturely being has its own integrity – being neither God nor needed by God – creatures are not that 'serious', as Rowan Williams nicely puts it. [32](#) Instead creatures are groundless, with no 'density and solidity' other than that which they receive as gift because they remain suspended 'on the divine communication over an unfathomable abyss'. [33](#) This groundlessness, however, is not nihilism. Though creation is not serious, it is also not arbitrary, capricious or chaotic. Instead, as Williams concludes, creation exists 'because God loves and it is for no other reason.' [34](#) In other words, creation has a meaningful purpose, free loving communion, and this, in effect, is the creature's 'end'.

The Christian doctrine of creation 'out of nothing' therefore has two important implications and these implications combine to teach that creation – as a 'noun' – is essentially unnecessary yet meaningful. This conclusion clearly maps onto the earlier analysis of the nature of play, and thereby suggests a strong systematic link between the two. Theologian Hugo Rahner has thought as much, arguing that play and creation are inextricably linked, with God's creative activity being best understood as the 'playing of God'. [35](#) Rahner tracks this motif through a range of pre-Christian literature, from the pre-Socratics such as Heraclitus right through to the ancient myths which 'oscillate between world-creation and world-play, between king and child... that tell of an infant God.' [36](#) Drawing these various accounts together, Rahner writes:

Everywhere we find in such myths an intuitive feeling that the world was not created under some kind of constraint, that it did not unfold itself out of the divine in obedience to some inexorable cosmic law; rather, it was felt, was it born of a wise liberty, of the gay spontaneity of God's mind; in a word, it came from the hand of a child. [37](#)

With this conclusion in mind, Rahner turns to the book of Proverbs, where Wisdom is portrayed – according to his translation – as 'a carefree child' playing before God. [38](#) Confident in his findings, Rahner condenses his constructive argument into a succinct summary: 'Since God is a God who plays, man too must be a creature that plays: a *Homo ludens*'. [39](#)

Rahner is here arguing that the human creature echoes divine playfulness, with play being the true expression of the creature's being. This, we should note, is effectively an ontology of playfulness, which Rahner is developing through an understanding of the imaging of God. The human creature – like all creation – is fundamentally playful, and with this ontological point recognised, we are well on our way to discovering how Christians are to understand sport theologically.

Celebrating Contingency: A Theological Proposal

We should approach a Christian theology of sport with caution. This is because, as Robert K. Johnston has shown, theological accounts of playfulness often manage to undermine the autotelic nature of play. Reading the work of Sam Keen, for example, Johnston complains that play is made to serve an outside interest, being reduced to an escape from life's 'drudgery and disappointment'. ⁴⁰ Likewise, Jürgen Moltmann – in describing play as an eschatological experiment through which revolutionary reality breaks into the present – is charged with falsely rationalizing play by again finding its purpose outside itself. ⁴¹ As Johnston sees it, both Keen and Moltmann make the same mistake, 'their functionally oriented theologies ultimately turn play into a form of work...[and this] aborts the world of play'. ⁴²

Strangely, however, Johnston himself falls into the instrumentalist trap he critiques. The constructive part of his argument begins with the familiar assertion that play 'must be entered into without outside purpose... [and] cannot be connected with material interest or ulterior motive, for then the boundaries of the playground and the limits of the playtime are violated'. ⁴³ Johnston, however, recognises that play does have 'outside' consequences, which, he suggests, include a 'presentiment of the sacred'. ⁴⁴ Johnston, however, wants to protect his original definition and so he proceeds to describe play as the holding 'in tension [of] a variety of polarities', an insight which allows him to highlight the tension between the real and artificial, the individual and communal, as well as between spontaneity and design. ⁴⁵ Having examined these playful tensions, Johnston introduces the idea of a 'non-instrumentality which is nevertheless productive', a part of his argument which is subsequently bankrolled by collapsing the distinction between play and worship, with play becoming the liberator of 'one's spirit so that it moves outward towards the sacred'. ⁴⁶ In other words, play is 'the avenue through which God communes with us', which, as Johnston recognises, gives play 'an external value that reaches far beyond the boundary of the play world' itself. ⁴⁷ Here we can see that Johnston manages to transform the joy of play into – what he terms – 'the Joy of God', with play effectively reduced to serving divine revelation. Like both Keen and Moltmann before him, Johnston finds the motive for play outside play, though this motive just happens to be a desire for God. ⁴⁸

Hugo Rahner makes a similar move. Influenced by his reading of Plato, Rahner concludes that play is a participation in the divine, 'the spirits returning homeward to God'. ⁴⁹ Every form of play, for Rahner, 'arises from the longing for the vision of the divine', with play reduced to 'a secret preparatory exercise for the object of [the trapped spirit's] longing'. ⁵⁰ As with Johnston, play becomes an activity that brings the participant into the divine presence, a means of lively fellowship with God, which – of course – is otherwise known as worship. ⁵¹ Of course, if play is autotelic and serves no purpose beyond itself, worship will look like a good way to explain it. This is because – as Sam Wells puts it – '[w]orship isn't for anything. It is one of the few human activities conducted for its own sake... Worship has its own inner logic and intrinsic worth'. ⁵² That said, as we saw at the outset of this article, the church has always wanted to distinguish its worship from sport, refusing to collapse the two into one and keeping its liturgy free of sporting endeavour. Though this stance need not deny the strong family resemblance between worship and play, it does deny that the two are the same thing. For the church, sport is not worship and worship is not sport. ⁵³ But how else can sport be understood?

Recall the doctrine of creation. God in his generosity freely calls the creature into existence 'out of nothing'. This doctrine implies that the creature is not God, it is 'not that serious' as Williams put it. Instead, the creature enjoys a genuine existence 'suspended over an unfathomable abyss'. Now, if creation is neither God nor nothing, could it be that worship is the creature before God giving thanks and praise for the loving communion of God-with-the-creature whereas play is – in true distinction yet family resemblance – the free celebration of the creature's own contingency in the face of nothingness? In other words, is play the celebration of ourselves by ourselves in distinction from worship which is the celebration of God with us in communion? Are worship and play two different sides to the same contingent coin?

As I see the matter, this way of conceptualising play does preserve its autotelic nature. Whereas worship is the joyful offering of the creature's life back to God in service to God, play is the celebration of playful existence, the free expression of gratuitous nature with no purpose beyond itself – nothing more than the chiming of our own being as creatures of God. In effect, it is the creature as itself, related to nothing beyond itself, God included. 54 Now, of course, this theological account of play will need to be tempered. The Christian doctrine of the Fall – basically, the taking of ourselves too seriously in the mistaken desire to be God – means that our experience of play is corrupted. Fallen play has become self-worship, nothing less than the denial of our genuine contingency by confusing ourselves with God (which is precisely why, historically, it is bound so closely to pagan idolatry). But this is not to say that play is somehow consequent to the Fall. Instead, play – like the vocation to work and to worship – is prelapsarian because it is written into the very fabric of our created being. This would mean that play is redeemable – and when it is redeemed, play is afforded its proper place alongside both worship and work in the life of the Sabbath-shaped creature. Of course, fully redeemed play requires a bit of imagination on our part, but – as Hoffman has argued – surely we can picture a playing 'with', rather than a playing 'against', the redeemed contest of two teams, 'Grace' with 'Humility', rather than 'First Baptists' against 'First Methodists'? Things need not remain as they are. 55

So what therefore are we saying about the nature of sport? One way to answer this question is by way of analogy: sport is to play what religion is to worship. In other words, sport is the institutional celebration of contingency, the ritualised chiming of our own being, the ceremonial enjoyment of not being God and not being nothing. Now, if this is the case then whenever we play sport – or perhaps join with five billion others to watch the Olympics in Beijing or London – we do not do it for any extrinsic reason. These events are not like our eating or our drinking, our sleeping or our working, and they are not like our worship either. As sporting events, they serve no outside purpose, they simply are – and perhaps that is why we find them so much fun and why they remain so popular. They are simply the ritual chiming of our material being distinct from God and in the face of nothingness.

But where does all this leave God in relation to our sport? Well, perhaps it leaves him somehow at a mysterious distance. Perhaps sport is the very edge of our existence, the deserted point – therefore the miraculous point – of the irreducible otherness of the creature suspended over nothingness. God respects and enables this distance so that the creature can be itself in communion with him, and if this is the case, then it might well mean that God remains somehow uninvolved in our games, refusing to determine their outcome, because sport is somehow the one thing void of his providential guidance. 56 And so, if you like, games – as the fundamental gift of existence – are a place where God himself is just like a

spectator, freed to celebrate the contingencies of our existence, and, for that reason, I suspect he finds sport just as much a delight as we clearly do. 57

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Endnotes

- 1 See the discussion in Hoffman 2010: 36-45
- 2 Hoffman 2010: 51-55,78
- 3 Higgs 2004: 7
- 4 Guttman 2004: 7
- 5 Guttman 2004: 7-11
- 6 Guttman 2004: 29-38,32
- 7 For historical links between sport and religion, see Guttman 2004: 39-49
- 8 For example St Jerome sets sport and worship in strict opposition, see Hoffman 2010: 36
- 9 See Hoffman 2010: 71
- 10 Guttman 2004: 1
- 11 The contemporary attempt to turn sports into religion is the major theme of Higgs 2004
- 12 Huizinga 1955: 1
- 13 For a helpful summary of different ways to understanding the function of sport, see Johnston 1997: 32
- 14 Huizinga 1955: 2-3
- 15 See Guttman 2004: 1
- 16 Huizinga 1955: 9
- 17 Caillois 2001: 7
- 18 Johnston 1977: 33
- 19 Huizinga 1955: 13
- 20 cf Moltmann 1973: 31 – ‘Just asking for the purpose of a game makes a person a spoilsport’
- 21 Heinegg 1974: 1198
- 22 Huizinga 1955: 8
- 23 Caillois 2001: 6
- 24 For examples of its harm, see the correlation between sport and injury in Hoffman 2010: 175-189
- 25 Guttman 2004: 1
- 26 Guttman 2004: 1
- 27 Guttman 2004: 3
- 28 cf Young 1991: 150 – ‘The adoption of the view that the world was created out of nothing was almost universal in Christian circles very quickly’
- 29 See this logic at work, for example, in Barth 1949: 35-64
- 30 This is one of the main themes of Gunton 1998
- 31 See Jenson 2003: 25
- 32 Williams 2008 – available at www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/1205/ [accessed 26/2/2011]
- 33 Williams 2008
- 34 Williams 2008

- 35 Rahner 1967: 11-12. Jürgen Moltmann also makes the requisite point: 'Game playing...corresponds to the ultimate groundlessness of the world...[because] the world as free creation cannot be a necessary unfolding of God nor an emanation of his being from his divine fullness. God is free. But he does not act capriciously. When he creates something that is not God but also not nothing, then this must have its ground not in itself but in God's good will or pleasure. Hence the creation is God's play, a play of his groundless and inscrutable wisdom' Moltmann 1974: 40-41
- 36 Rahner 1967: 16-17
- 37 Rahner 1967: 18
- 38 Rahner argues that the original word employed twice elsewhere to describe the action of King David – has to do with a playful dance. Rahner 1967: 19-21
- 39 Rahner 1967: 25
- 40 Johnston 1977: 71
- 41 Johnston 1977: 71
- 42 Johnston 1977: 71. Johnston follows Huizinga, who warned play often serves something 'beyond' itself, with a 'quasi-rationalistic element irresistibly creep[ing] in' Huizinga 1955: 17
- 43 Johnston 1977: 34
- 44 Johnston:1977 34
- 45 Johnston 1977: 34-35
- 46 Johnston 1977: 42,44
- 47 Johnston 1977: 49,80
- 48 Johnston 1977: 81
- 49 Rahner 1967: 12
- 50 Rahner 1967: 65,87
- 51 Novak also falls into this trap from time to time: see, for example, when sport 'works' it is 'as though into the fiery heart of the Creator we had momentary insight.' Novak 1994: 159
- 52 Wells 2002: 66-74, quoting from 66. Having made this point, Wells shows all the secondary benefits that result from worship!
- 53 Note that the Westminster Confession, for example, on which Wells draws, states that worship is our *chief* end, not our *only* end. There is room to find a complement to worship as I will argue
- 54 The idea of playful contingency can be found in some recent literature, but has not been explained *theologically*. For example, Robert Novak suggests play is 'Confidence in contingency and in Fate. Delight in creation as it is', and that '[a]t the heart of play is love for the finite, the limited, the bounded' Novak 1994: 220,232. Whereas James Nuechterlein asserts that, 'Sports is simply a grace: a minor grace, but a grace nonetheless... Sports relieves the weight of life... It reminds us, precisely in its absurd elevation of the trivial, not to take ourselves too seriously' Nuechterlein 1998: 8-12. Higgs and Braswell also want to distinguish sports from religion but do not provide clear *theological* reasons for doing so. As they themselves put it, 'We are neither theologians nor historians of religion' Higgs 2004: xv
- 55 Hoffmann 2010: 289

56 I am grateful to David Hilborn for helping me connect the question of contingency to the question of divine determination

57 With thanks to the Research Institute in Systematic Theology at King's College London and the Oxford Centre for Christianity and Culture at Regent's Park College, University of Oxford for comments on versions of this argument