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The body, religion and sports

Through the lenses of postmodern religiosity

Introduction: the body as postmodern communication of identity

Let me start by quoting a fairly recent song by Robbie Williams. In his song *Bodies* (2009) the lyrics go like this:

God gave me the sunshine,
Then showed me my lifeline
I was told it was all mine,
Then I got laid on a ley line
What a day, what a day,
And your Jesus really died for me
Then Jesus really tried for me

UK and entropy,
I feel like its ****in' me
Wanna feed off the energy,
Love living like a deity
What a day, one day,
And your Jesus really died for me
I guess Jesus really tried for me

Bodies in the Bodhi tree,
Bodies making chemistry
Bodies on my family,
Bodies in the way of me
Bodies in the cemetery,
And that's the way it's gonna be

All we've ever wanted
Is to look good naked

Hope that someone can take it
God save me rejection
From my reflection,
I want perfection

Praying for the rapture,
'Cause it's stranger getting stranger
And everything's contagious
It's the modern middle ages
All day every day
And if Jesus really died for me
Then Jesus really tried for me

Bodies in the Bodhi tree,
Bodies making chemistry.

The song is very rhythmic in a restrained way, and performed in a tight, up-beat tempo. The singing is mixed close-up, as if the singer's almost touching the listener with his voice. Although a lot could be said about the lyrics, saturated in the music's overall setting, my interest in this song for writing an essay on the theme 'body, sport and religion' is mostly focused on the chorus of the song, where Williams in a very intense way talks about a feature in modern living which is concentrated on the body, saying:

All we ever wanted
is to look good naked,
hope that someone can take it.
God save me rejection,
from my reflection,
I want perfection.

Echoing some of the insights presented by the Norwegian theologian, Paul-Otto Brunstad, I am inclined to interpret Robbie Williams's song as a good description of many young western people's way of picturing what's important in their lives, especially focusing on their own body as the most important way of communicating their identity. Being young is almost by definition a time when one is trying to build up a certain identity, but living in a so called postmodern society, where most of the traditional life-guiding ideological stories are broken down to more or less free-floating fragments, the content

of one's own narration of oneself is left to the individual to bring together. By referring to Anthony Giddens's notion of the concept of 'lifestyle',¹ Brunstad goes on to identify the body-focus as something very important today in young people's self-conception.

Brunstad's conceptual contrast is articulated between a 'view of life' and 'lifestyle'. If by a view of life we are trying to identify a person's inner convictions as his or her ground for thoughts, feelings, attitudes, values and ways of acting, we could in line with this talk about 'lifestyle' as something more or less vaguely connected to a view of life, but at the same time seen as a person's external, symbol-oriented way of communication one's inner convictions or view of life related identity. Brunstad emphasises that the postmodern condition not only lays the actual need to build one's identity on the individual, but also stresses and makes it urgent to communicate this more or less fragmented identity. This view of life-based external communication is seen by Brunstad as important as actual reflection on one's own identity. And in this lies, according to him, the urgent need to focus on the individual's body:

When most of the other frames for views of life are taken away, the body appears to be the last option when it comes to finding a frame for articulating one's view of life. The body is seen as an independent 'house', a singular cosmos in a world, which for many people appears to be a total chaos. The individual body is not representative of anything else but oneself, and is seen as free in disposition when it comes to shaping oneself, one's image and identity. The more divorced from tradition we become, the more important the body will be for the individual's way of building his or her identity and individuality. (Brunstad 1998: 23, my translation.)

The body is thus seen as an important aspect in giving 'material form to a particular narrative of self-identity' (Giddens 1997: 81). The body is ripped off from most of the old conventions regarding the body as a tool for some working processes, and instead put into a totally new setting of self communication. And not just any natural body, but a fit, well-trained body according to the social ideals of the slim, tight, well adjusted body of today. Or in Robbie

1 'A lifestyle can be defined as a more or less integrated set of practices which an individual embraces, not only because such practices fulfil utilitarian needs, but because they give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity' (Giddens 1997: 81). See also Brunstad 1998: 22.

Williams's words: 'all we ever wanted is to look good naked, hope that someone can take it. . .'

In this way one can at least communicate the power of will and determination over the body, right in the face of so much abundance of everything, and in spite of so many opportunities for eating without any need to starve. This more or less ascetic, or at least disciplined attitude towards one's body grants, according to Brunstad, a certain sense of security: one can, at least, have control over one's own life and communicate this with and through the body. Brunstad states:

Security is connected to an idea of a timeless, slim and well-trained body. With a slim body you can have success, not only in connecting to a life-partner, but also in your social life, among friends and at work. The media and the world of advertising are constantly sending out images of the body as finding its happiness through satisfaction of the bodily needs. And through it all, an image of a new sense of certainty and security is brought about, both on individual as well as on social levels. (Brunstad 1998: 25, my translation.)

With this kind of focus on the individual body as a transmitter and communicator of postmodern, fragmented identities, self-images and built-up narratives, one is forced to call upon the body as a place of ongoing ideological construction. With all the images of perfect bodies reflecting the happy life floating around, constantly reminding oneself of the body-project, it is so easy to be dissatisfied, yet restlessly striving for the image of perfection. The ongoing situation is echoed in the last part of Robbie Williams's paradoxical chorus lines: 'save me rejection, from my reflection, I want perfection.' The body, viewed through the horizon of perfection is always afraid of rejection, the body as vulnerability and fragility, the body always under construction, but at the same time a reminder of my identity, of my need to tell everybody about my identity-based narrative.

From body-centeredness to sports

The lyrics in Williams's song, interpreted through the lenses of Brunstad's notions about the body as the final fluid certainty of keeping control in a chaotic world, is my link to a discussion about sports and its ideological aspects.

If the body is, as pictured in Brunstad's notion of the postmodern landscape of views of life, all about striving for the perfect—or at least acceptable—well-trained body, and if life is so centered around health and well-being, then sports comes very naturally to mind as one of the most obvious sources of the leading ideological narratives of our time. Actually it is quite hard to talk about elite sports as promoting health and a sound lifestyle anymore, since what is needed in most of the elite sports today is often way beyond any idea of normal health or sound, balanced lifestyles. In elite sports one is more or less supposed to constantly stretch the limits of one's health in order to perform at one's best. But one can turn the argument around, and say that health and a sound lifestyle are absolutely needed as a precondition for someone being able to perform as an elite sportsman or sportswoman. In that sense, sportsmen and sportswomen often have what it takes of external markers of communicating success, happiness and even social competence. Their well-trained, disciplined bodies can thus be seen as desirable images for what's good in life.

But how far can this image of the perfect body be stretched in making a difference in what's really important in life? Can sports be seen as a view of life? Or even as a religion, honouring the human capacity for overtaking obstacles in order to celebrate some kind of achievable holiness in a world where we can create our own identity-based narratives?

The notion of secularity as a perspective on sports and religion

In order to better understand the relation of sports and religion, my suggestion is that one has to start with an introductory discussion about secularism and the secularities of our time. Let me start by quoting the following text:

One understanding of secularity then is in terms of public spaces. These have been allegedly emptied of God, or of any reference to ultimate reality. Or taken from another side, as we function within various spheres of activity—economic, political, cultural, educational, professional, recreational—the norms and principles we follow, the deliberations we engage in, generally don't refer us to God or to any religious beliefs; the considerations we act on are internal to the 'rationality' of each sphere—maximum gain within the economy, the greatest benefit to the greatest number in the political area, and so on. This is a striking contrast to earlier periods, . . . But whether we see this in terms of prescriptions, or in terms of ritual

or ceremonial presence, this emptying of religion from autonomous social spheres is, of course, compatible with the vast majority of people still believing in God, and practising their religion vigorously. (Taylor 2007: 2.)

Charles Taylor, in his by now fairly famous and widely read book *A Secular Age* (2007), is actually not as interested in talking about secularity as religion emptied from more or less public spaces, as he is in the shift of the whole background framework, or 'framework of the taken for granted' in which 'one believes or refuses to believe in God' and the conditions for 'different kinds of *lived experiences* involved in understanding your life in one way or the other, on what it's like to *live* as a believer or an unbeliever' (Taylor 2007: 5, 13, my emphasis). For my starting point this quotation is, for time being, enough. Secularity can thus be taken to mean; 1) that there is a specific sphere of aspects in regard to things we usually call religion or religious, and 2) that this sphere is less and less interesting or necessary to the society, people in general, or individuals.

One way of talking about post-secularity, at least as something opposed to the well-known theories of secularization, is to start noticing how the picture of well organized autonomous spheres is breaking down. Religion, or more precisely, religious practice and people acting out of their religious convictions refuse in so many ways to be formed only in a religious, and private, sphere of modern life. I will now look more closely at this phenomenon with special regard to modern sports practices. Taylor's notion of a rationality internal to various autonomous spheres is challenged in different ways in modern sports practices, at least at the level of elite sports. One very illuminating example of this can be seen at top-level football. The following example comes from the last World Cup in South-Africa 2010, an example I personally find very illustrative. The former head coach for Sweden, Lars Lagerbäck and his staff, were in charge of the Nigerian national team in the World Cup finals. As the Swedish national team did not make their way to the finals, the national broadcasting company, Swedish television (SVT), focused therefore on teams with Swedish coaches, Lagerbäck as one of the two (Sven-Göran Ericsson was the other, head coach for Ivory Coast at that time). When SVT visited the training ground for the Nigerian national team in their preparations for the finals, the TV-team were met by a situation, where the whole team, including the coaches and the assisting staff, were standing in a circle in the middle of the pitch, holding each other's hands with closed eyes. From my knowledge of the Nigerian players I knew that most of them were religious, both Christians and Muslims, interestingly *per se*. For these Nigerian players it was perfectly

natural to pray together before a match, and even before starting their training session together. As Nigeria is a country that is divided into two regions with different religions, this praying together as Christians and Muslims was, of course, very interesting in uniting both the country and the team.

The most striking part for me was the actual reactions of the TV-commentators while watching this moment of religious prayer. It was very obvious that they were both bothered and confused. The way this Nigerian team was making its preparations for the World Cup finals, and even more so by watching their own former head coach taking part in this prayer was both surprising and stunning. The most striking part was the very lack of words for expressing what they saw happening on the pitch. For them, commentating on football did not include religious moments. In their view it was probably okay that individual players were religious, but based on their reactions and total lack of language to explain what was going on, it was clear that they at best thought of religion as something very personal and private, located outside the game of football.

In a normal setting the commentators usually go on talking about the team, players, tactics, chances to beat the next opponents and so on, but now they just sat there without saying anything. And after some moments of silence, one of the commentators started to lighten up the situation, and now, in his probably normal, secularized way of confronting something religious, he tried to make a psychological explanation of how important mental preparations are in sports, and that this standing out there on the pitch and holding hands, surely must be one part of the Nigerian national team's way of mental training. But as a spectator I was left with a certain feeling of uneasiness in the voice of the commentator. He did not actually have words that would fit the situation, nor a language that he could use with his normal voice of confidence as an expert guiding the spectators to a better understanding of the session of training.

Without any knowledge of the condition of religious practice in Nigeria, it is, of course, very hard to see the moment of prayer as a particular manifestation of inter-religiosity taking place, but without any sense of religiosity at all, there was nothing but a speechless silence in the commentators' reaction. Psychological approaches were the best that could be offered by the commentators at that moment, but still with a feeling of uneasiness.

My reason for picking up this example is, of course, that it is a good illustration of both what a religious practice may look like in an expected unreligious surrounding, in this case in sports and the world of football, and what a typical secularized reaction towards religious practices outside expected reli-

gious spheres may look like. Both of these aspects underline how well the idea of religion and religiosity as something happening in a sphere of its own, a particular religious sphere, have become the normal way of picturing religion in modern society. Sport cannot, in this view, be seen as an arena for religious practice. Or can it?

For a religious scholar like Danièle Hervieu-Léger, religions of today cannot be seen as being as isolated as the theories of secularization have taught us. In her opposite view, religions are not dwelling in specific spheres that can be called religious:

Nevertheless, beyond the obviousness of this disintegration of the religious in modern societies, one is forced to admit that religion still speaks . . . But it doesn't speak in those areas where one might expect. One discovers its presence, diffuse, implicit or invisible, in economics, politics, esthetics, in the scientific, in the ethical and in the symbolic. Instead of focusing one's interest on the relationship between the diminishing domain of the religious (that is, its institutions and that of the 'historical' religions) and other social domains (the political, the therapeutic, the esthetic, etc.), one is here led to an investigation of the diverse, surreptitious manifestations of religion in all profane and reputedly non-religious zones of human activity. (Hervieu-Léger 1999: 76.)

In this perspective one should not be that surprised to find religious practice even in the field of sports. This tendency of finding different kinds of manifestations of religious contents and symbolisms in other spheres of life outside the traditional religious spheres is seen as 'dedifferentiation', a concept outlined by Paul Heelas (1998: 2–3). This new religious dedifferentiation often occurs as 'a willingness to combine symbols from disparate codes and frameworks of meaning, even at the cost of disjunctions and eclecticism' (Beckford 1992: 19). Religion is thus not taken as a whole package, but more as a set of existential sources, which can be used in a more eclectic way.

There are many examples of sportsmen and women practising their religious views in sports, but most of these religious expressions can be seen as private convictions occurring in different places, all in line with Taylor's notion that emptying religion from social spheres is still 'compatible with the vast majority of people still believing in God, and practising their religion vigorously' (Taylor 2007: 2), even on sports fields. But the key supposition in the standard view of secularization is still that sports should be seen as a specific sphere of life, whereas religion should be treated as another similar

sphere, and these should not be mixed-up in any way. Seeing Nigerian football players praying is therefore not sport as religion, but religious sportsmen. This distinction is, on the other hand, not as innocent as it seems at first sight, especially when viewed from a standard secular perspective. There are voices, both historical and contemporary, arguing that the split between sport and religion is not necessarily the only possible way of picturing sports.

Sports as religion—different voices

If we go way back in the history of sports, the picture that comes out is not that secularized. Looking at the ancient Greek Olympics that were held in 776 BC–392 AD we actually can't find this kind of divided picture. Quite the contrary, the ancient Olympic Games were seen as one part of religious festivals honouring the gods of ancient Greece. Some historians even state that the religious cult at that time was the actual root for the organized sports games. The first sports arenas were, for instance, located in the temple area, and the sports activities were seen as acts of devotion to the gods, picturing the gods as the real spectators of the games. One could say that the sports events were a ritualized way of honouring the gods, and bringing the transcendent sphere of gods among the people while the people attended the sports games as religious festivals (see e.g. Koski *et al.* 2004: 31–2).

Sports and religion were thus intertwined in a way that is quite hard to understand from our modern point of view. This may even be a more or less idealized conception of the ancient Olympic Games, over-emphasizing the role religion actually played. And we can, as Shirl J. Hoffman points out, quite early on in the history also notice a certain kind of secularization in this respect:

Over time, however, sport became warped by converging forces of specialization, rationalization, bureaucratization and quantification, so warped in fact, that contemporary societies find it difficult even to imagine any substantive commonalities between it and the practice of religion (Hoffman 1992a: 153).

Hoffman's way of underlining the perspective of contemporary societies looks much more familiar, and a lot of sports scholars seem to be keen to emphasize this idea of religion as something very different from sports. It is of vital interest for Hoffman that we should welcome the separation between religion

and sports. In his perspective both religion and sports lose something very important of their inner characteristics if they are comprehended in too close a relation. He says:

To suggest, however, that sports possess salvational power or that they embody anything other than a dimly reflected glory runs the risk of humanizing the sacred, gutting it of its autonomy, and reducing it to merely a projection of human aspirations. Not only this, it threatens to burden a fascinating human experience—made the more fascinating for the freedom and the lightness of spirit it entails—with some weighty cosmic baggage. (Hoffman 1992a: 158.)

In other words: ‘Why do we mix religion with sport’ (Hoffman 1992b: 133)? The question arises, according to Hoffman, from the fact that there is continually a temptation to picture some sports achievements, records, games, matches as being so extraordinary that you feel a need to use a more powerful, symbolically saturated language to express your experience. From that kind of feeling it is easy to start talking about sports achievements in religious language.

Robert J. Higgs is another scholar who warns about the mix-up of sports and religion. In his view sports and play are to be seen primarily from an aesthetic perspective, whereas religion is all about experiencing the holy, the sublime and the transcendent. From his perspective it is very troublesome to mix these categories: ‘The most play can do is to make the world bearable; the most that sport can do is to make it beautiful. When claims are made for them beyond these roles, they too become part of the problem.’ (Higgs 1992: 101.)

The Danish scholar Hans Bonde has, in what may be called a mediating position, a more nuanced, and, in my view, more realistic and up-to-date view of how lots of modern sports consumers tend to approach the meaning of sports in their life. Bonde has no need to make a strong separation between sports and religion, although he feels a need to make a distinction. After quoting the legendary football coach Bill Shankley’s famous statement that football is far more important than life itself, Bonde goes on saying:

Does this mean that sport is a religion? No, sport is sport and religion is religion. In order for sport to become a religion it needs to make room for a myth of creation, and until now there has not been any talk of such myth. But on the other hand, it can be said that modern sport can entail a religious aspect. As the Christian church has become more and more

outdated and superfluous, sport has taken over more and more of the functions of religion, more precisely the need for fellowship, security, orderliness, identity and ecstasy. In short glimpses sport and religion are touching each other, especially when an individual overcomes him- or herself and could be pictured as floating in the ocean of masses. . . .
(Bonde 1993: 47, my translation; see also p. 9.)

What Bonde actually is pointing to is a different way of looking at the distinction between sports and religion. Instead of talking about what sports or religion is, or should be, by distinction, Bonde is focusing on what could have a religious function in or through sports. This particular angle looks at religion from the perspective of secularization, and aims at the question that if there is religious potential in sports, in its highlights as representing something religious.

All the presented views on the distinction between sports and religion seem to start their arguments from a certain substantial picture of religion as always anchored in transcendent spheres, and therefore as something very different from the sphere of sports. But if one could change the perspective to a more functional kind of question, one could instead be looking for what kinds of experiences function as, or are treated as religious experiences in people's lives today. From this perspective, sports practices look quite different. It is time to line up some thoughts on postmodern religiosity and sport experiences.

Postmodern religiosity and sport experiences

Secularization is here not only seen as a way of refusing references to God in different spheres of life, but also as a statement of individualistic authority, of what can and could be of religious importance to a certain individual. Many scholars regard this shift as a shift towards postmodern religiosity, especially when emphasizing the personal religious choice instead of inherited religious traditions or churches as religious authorities. From such an angle, religion and religious belief are seen as something centered entirely around individuals and their personal accomplishments. It is a religion that is more or less characterized by the primacy accorded to personal experience, which guides everyone according to their own way.

From a postmodern and a more fragmented perspective, a religious person is not actually surrendering to religious claims of truth that come from

the religious tradition. It is, therefore, not a matter of discovering and committing oneself to a truth outside the self. Instead it is, one could say, more a matter of experimentation—everyone finding their own truth for themselves. In spiritual or religious matters, no authority defines and imposes any external norms upon the individual. This more individualistic and self-authorized approach, which can be seen in this fragmented religious vision, is not so interested in bringing some sort of salvational power from a transcendent religious sphere into people's lives. The objective pursued is, as Hervieu-Léger (2003: 164, see also 2000: 33–3) puts it, the perfection of the self, a perfection which is not concerned with the moral accomplishments of the individual, but with access to a higher state of being.

What Hervieu-Léger points at actually has many similarities with the secularized religion that Abraham Maslow calls upon in his talks about peak-experiences. Already in the 1960s, Maslow suggested that religions need to be seen from the perspective of the individuals' inner experience, experiences open to all. In his book *Religions, Values and Peak-experiences* (1964) he underlines his perception of religions that really matter to people in the following way:

From the point of view of the peak-experiences, each person has his own private religion, which he develops out of his own private revelations, in which are revealed to him his own private myths and symbols, rituals and ceremonials, which may be of the profoundest meaning to him personally and yet completely idiosyncratic, i.e. of no meaning to anyone else. But to say it more simply, each 'peaker' discovers, develops, and retains his own religion. (Maslow 1964: 28.)

From this understanding of religion, it is quite easy to draw the conclusion that for some people sport can be of profound religious experience, and can even function as a religious horizon. No myth of creation is needed or looked for, no external salvation is sought. The only interesting thing that is asked for is if the experience of something, in this case sports, can have a profound meaning for the individual personally, on a view of life at a kind of profound level. From this point of departure, sport has a great religious potential. Or as sports scholar Charles Prebish, who himself gladly talks about sport as a religion, makes his point. In sports settings there are lots of possibilities for different participants to experience something extraordinary:

Just who is it that gets religious experience in sport? Curiously, these experiences seem not to be specific to the athlete-participant, the specialist. Similar responses can be evoked from coaches, officials, and, not so surprisingly, spectators (present or otherwise). After all, each of the above advocates does participate in his or her own way. This latter point is particularly important, I think, because it indicates that no special athletic talent is required in the quest for salvation in sport. . . . Consequently, religious experience in sport is no more confined to the participants on the playing field than is traditional experience confined to the priest, minister, or rabbi. (Prebish 1992: 51–2.)

One could still, if one accepts the interpretation that sport experiences can be seen from religious perspectives, need to ask if it actually is the sport experience in itself that is or could be religious, or are the religious experiences more likely to stem from the social and existential environments in which different sports are embedded. If one grants the possibility that religious experiences can indeed occur, and that reports of these occurrences during sport activity are valid, there remains, as Shirl J. Hoffman underlines, the need, the task of determining, if there really is something inherent in sporting activities capable of evoking religious experiences. Does the human experience of sport *per se* induce subjective states that meet criteria for religious experience, or is the experience of sport merely accidental to their occurrence? (Hoffman 1992b: 70–1.)

The question put forward by Hoffman has its taken-for-granted position in that religious experiences are singled out as particular experiences that can be characterized as religious experiences, no matter where they occur. There should be something religiously distinguished in these experiences for them to be seen as authentic experiences.

From the postmodern perspective the need to phrase the question in this way is actually not needed. If religion for a postmodern individual is not a question turning into a place of devotion to a God, or to look for religious truths, but on the contrary is seen as a need to look for what kinds of peak-experiences can help him or her have access to a higher state of being, then these kinds of questions do not arise. When Hervieu-Léger is talking about the 'shared sacred' in sports, it is something that 'corresponds directly to the capacity for big occasions in competitive sport to rally huge crowds, unite them in their support and bring them to fever pitch, carried beyond themselves in the shared emotions of victory and defeat' (Hervieu-Léger 2000: 55).

But, it is of the greatest importance to notice that this way of talking about the shared sacred in the postmodern religious landscape involves a certain assumption that should not be forgotten. For Hervieu-Léger all talk about sacredness is not necessarily a matter of religion. For her ‘this “secular sacred” is at the source of a secular religion, which presents itself as a functional equivalent of those traditional religions in a cultural arena where the question of salvation has lost its pertinence’ (2000: 103). From this she goes on to say:

What ritual occasions in sport display in their very immediacy is in fact the dissociation, characteristic of modern societies, between sacredness (as a collective experience of the presence of a force transcending individual consciousness and hence producing meaning) and religion (as ritualized remembering of a core lineage, in relation to which present experience constructs meaning). Given this line of argument, one can put forward the notion that the significance of spectator sports in modern society is that they offer in small pieces (and in company with other manifestations—rock concerts, demos, telethons, etc.) access to an experience of the sacred (an immediate, emotional realization of meaning) which *en masse* no longer functions in the religious mode. Certainly, there is nothing metaphorical about the relationship between sport and religion, given that the production is central of both. (Hervieu-Léger 2000: 103–4.)

In her view postmodern religiosity is in most cases understandable only when seen from the secularized perspective. That is, when religion is both free-floating, syphoned off from religious tradition, individualized, atomized and cut off from all kinds of questions of religious authority. From this perspective we can, as she underlines, talk about the sacred, but it has a special, value-loaded meaning. The objective pursued above all is the perfection of the self:

The salvation sought through this work of self-perfection is exclusively concerned with life here below. It is a question of attaining, in as complete a manner as possible, the goals which modern society offers as something attainable by all: health, well-being, vitality, and beauty. This conception of a strictly ‘this-worldly’ salvation is set within a monistic understanding of the world: it rejects all dualisms. (Hervieu-Léger 2003: 164.)²

2 See also Hervieu-Léger 2000: 33–4.

With these short passages on postmodern religiosity with its focus on religious experience as something sacred and reachable for all, I now want to turn to how sports can be thought of from within the sport culture. As sport is mainly a practice of physical activity, it is not that easy to find philosophically sophisticated reflections on sports as a practice, and how one can understand and look at the purpose of sports. One source of highest interest is still possible, and I therefore turn to the thinking of Pierre de Coubertin (1863–1937), the ‘founder’ and promoter of the modern Olympic movement, and especially to his ideas of Olympism, the philosophy behind the modern Olympic movement. His thinking on sports ideology is very revealing as his main interest is introducing sport as a new social phenomenon in western societies in late nineteenth century and early twentieth century.

Sports ideology as Olympism—the secular religion

The modern Olympic movement has a kind of philosophical codex called the Olympic Charter. In the first two principles of the Olympic Charter it is stated that:

Olympism is a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind. Blending sport with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy of effort, the educational value of good example and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles. The goal of Olympism is to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of man, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity. (Olympic Charter: Fundamental Principles of Olympism § 1–2.)

What is in my interest is to focus on the formulation that ‘olympism is a philosophy of life’. This is quite a recent formulation of the ideas behind the Olympic movement. It echoes the thinking of de Coubertin, but at the same time it is neutralized in order to be more relevant for the modern, globalized sports movement. The contrast for the tendency to neutralize the core message of the Olympic movement can be noticed, for instance, in a speech the IOC’s former president, Avery Brundage, gave ahead of the Olympics in Tokyo in 1964. In his words the Olympic movement can be seen as a kind of meta-religion, combining all the important values from other religions: ‘[d]ie olympische Bewegung ist eine Religion des 20. Jahrhunderts, eine Religion

mit universalem Anspruch, die in sich alle grundwerte anderer Religionen vereinigt, attraktiv für die Jugend, und wir vom Internationalen Olympischen Komitee sind ihre Jünger' (quoted in Jakobi 1984: 84).

De Coubertin's original perspective on Olympism is much more eurocentric and romantic, but also religiously naïve, as is Brundage's, but for different reasons. In a speech that de Coubertin gave on 6 March 1929 he states, in the same manner as Brundage did 35 years later, that '[l]ike ancient athletics, modern athletics is a *religion*, a *belief*, a *passionate movement of the spirit*' (de Coubertin 2000: 578, italics in original). In order to understand what de Coubertin actually has in mind, not only when talking about athletics as a religion, but in maintaining that it is a religion, we need to look more closely at his overall ideas on Olympism.

De Coubertin's vision lies heavily on his ideas of developing man and mankind through physical exercise. The goal is to develop a harmonious man, balancing the body with mind and character. In some other passages he talks about balance between the 'human body, mind and spirit, sense and will, instinct and conscience', which in a polemic stance he calls upon as 'the true paganism' (de Coubertin 2000: 566). In his view a person's moral character is best developed through the body, not through mind, but in the end these aspects of being a person should interact in harmony (p. 548). This goal of harmony or balance is in his vision called eurythmy. As he is not only interested in sports *per se*, but wants to develop the idea that western society should be seen as a society in constant progress, sports is the ideal arena for picturing this new society. Through mirroring the society, elite sports should be seen as a blending mix of power and effort on one hand, and beauty and moral character on the other:

Olympism is a state of mind that derives from the twofold doctrine: that of effort, and that of eurythmy. Notice how much the association of these two elements, the taste for excess and the taste for due measure, is in keeping with human nature. Though apparently contradictory, they are the basis for any total virility. Is there any man, in his full strength, limiting his initiatives, and who takes no pleasure whatsoever in going beyond what is expected of him? At the same time, however, is there any man in the full sense of the word who is displeased at seeing his intense zeal crowned with joyful tranquillity and self-control, surrounded by order, balance, and harmony?

Neither the tendency toward effort, nor the habit of eurythmy develops spontaneously in us. They require apprenticeship and training. . .

These virtues become part of our nature, taking root in us through practice. That is what makes organized athletic activity superior, the fact that it imposes both measure and excess on anyone engaging in it.

(de Coubertin 2000: 548.)

In de Coubertin's explanation as to why he actually wanted to call for the ancient Olympic Games to be restored in his own time, he makes the following declaration in the year 1908, the same year when the Olympics were held in London:

Thus, on all sides individual efforts are ready to converge towards an ideal of general harmony. . . . The work must be lasting, to exercise over the sports of the future that necessary and beneficent influence for which I look—an influence which shall make them the means of bringing to perfection the strong and hopeful youth of our white race, thus contributing to the perfection of all human society. (de Coubertin 2000: 546.)

One may be lulled by de Coubertin's explicit words, by his accentuate combination of 'youth, beauty and strength', and even more by stating that the Olympic vision tries to bring 'to perfection the strong and hopeful youth of our white race'. But in the light of rising Nazism in early 1930s Germany and the fact that the Olympic Games were to be held in Berlin in 1936, de Coubertin's Olympic vision looks even more alarming, not only in terms of trying to develop a sports culture and give opportunities to individual athletes to develop and demonstrate their athletic skills, but especially when drawing on connections from individual elite sportsmen to perfection of all human society. (de Coubertin 2000: 567.)

At this time in history, sports were not entertainment in the sense of how we talk of them as entertainment today, but an ideological tool for developing societies. This Olympism as a state of mind, as an order of balance and harmony is, according to de Coubertin, both celebrated and demonstrated in the Olympic Games every fourth year. These games were in his vision a religious, cyclical festival 'par excellence, celebrations of youth, beauty and strength' (de Coubertin 2000: 597). In a speech de Coubertin gave in August 1935, that is just about a year before the Olympics were held in Berlin in 1936, he presents his view of the symbolism used for the Olympic Games. In the speech called 'The Philosophical Foundation of Modern Olympism' he maintains the line from the top individual athlete as inspiration for developing the whole society:

The Olympic Games must be held on a strictly astronomical rhythm, because they are the quadrennial celebration of human springtime, honouring the successive arrival of human generations . . . The human springtime is expressed in the *young adult male* who can be compared to a superb machine in which all the gears have been set in place, ready for full operation. That is the person in whose honour the Olympic Games must be celebrated and their rhythm organized and maintained, because it is to him that the near future depends, as well as the harmonious passage from the past to the future. . . . From what I have just said, one must conclude that the true Olympic hero is, in my view, the *individual adult male*. (de Coubertin 2000: 582–2, italics in original.)

But, one has to ask, if this way of honouring the human springtime by displaying the individual adult male is religious in any specific way? Why bring in religion in describing the Olympics? But, keeping in mind his talk about sports practice as ‘true paganism’ one cannot stop only at noticing his view of man as being both androcentric and sexist. One has to see further ahead to understand that de Coubertin actually sees his vision as religious in character. It is not religious in a transcendent sense, but he calls it a religion, a secular religion that lacks gods, but instead focuses on human potential. As a matter of fact, in the speech from 1935 he starts his exposition of his view of Olympism with a comparison to religion. He states:

The primary, fundamental characteristic of ancient Olympism, and of modern Olympism as well, is that it is a *religion*. By chiseling his body through exercise as a sculptor does a statue, the ancient athlete ‘honoured the gods.’ In doing likewise, the modern athlete honours his country, his race and his flag. Therefore, I believe that I was right to restore, from the very beginning of modern Olympism, as a religious sentiment transformed and expanded by internationalism and democracy that are distinguishing features of our day. . . . It is not just internationalism and democracy, the foundations of the new human society now being constructed in civilized nations, but science as well that is involved in this sentiment. Through its constant progress, science has given man new ways to cultivate his body, to guide and strengthen nature, and to snatch the body from the constraints of unbridled passions to which it had become subject in the name of individual freedom. (de Coubertin 2000: 580.)

De Coubertin's reference to ancient Olympism is in fact revealing. If the athletes in ancient Olympics honoured the gods, this is no longer needed. What is needed is to visualize the breakthrough of the new age, where honouring the country, the race and the flag as well as stabilizing the new world order of internationalism and democracy is of religious importance. That this is a transformation of religious focus is totally a conscious choice for de Coubertin, but, as he had stated some centuries earlier, this need of transformation, or modernization, as he preferred to call it in 1910, 'is so obviously appropriate that there is no need to dwell on the matter' (de Coubertin 2000: 597).

In order to restore the most important aspects of the heritage of ancient Greece one has to look closer at the essence of that culture. According to de Coubertin, the gods of ancient Greece were not the key to understanding their culture. The most important point was to realize that the whole culture was a culture of humanism. Celebrating sports was then a natural part of celebrating this humanism, or the true paganism, as de Coubertin likes to call it. Hellenism is, he states, 'the cult of humanity in its present life and in its state of equilibrium' (de Coubertin 2000: 566), and goes on proclaiming the real humanistic heritage worthy of restoration in modern times:

This, then, was paganism, with its highly-desirable and fleeting companion, eurythmy. Our simplistic habit of cataloguing things leads us to define paganism as the adoration of idols, as if any religion, even the most materialistic, did not have its spiritual adherents and as though any religion, even the most mystical, did not have its adorers and of idols, even if they merely adored the golden calf, stronger and more highly praised now than ever before. There is also the true paganism that humanity will never be rid of and which, to utter a blasphemy, it is good that humanity cannot rid itself of entirely. That paganism is the religion of the human body, mind and spirit, sense and will, instinct and conscience. The flesh, the senses, and the instinct have the upper hand at times, the will and the conscience at other times. There are the two despots fighting for the primacy in us, a conflict that often tears us apart savagely. We must achieve balance. We do manage to do so, but we cannot hang on to it. The pendulum reaches the golden mean only when it is half-way between the two extremes between which it swings. Likewise, humanity—the individual or society—cannot stay midway in its race from one excess to another. When we do manage to restore the balance of an individual or a group, quite often the only way to achieve it is to aim for the opposite form of excess. (de Coubertin 2000: 566.)

De Coubertin belongs to the category of visionaries of the late nineteenth century that looked at traditional religion as something one needed to overcome in order to establish a more humanized religion based on progress, strength, power and ability in a new world order of internationalism. One can, for instance, think of August Comte, who in his most famous book *Cours de philosophie positive* (1830–42), portrays the development of humankind through different stages, from the metaphysical to the scientific positive stage—a transformation that includes abandoning all outdated religious ideas by welcoming the true humanity, a life in service for humanity and in admiration of the realized harmonious humanity (*le Grand Être*) (Ahlberg 1951: 165–71).

Or one can think of Ludwig Feuerbach in his outburst at traditional Christianity in the book *Das Wesen des Christenthums* (1841), where he states that the true Christianity is all about the human. All ideas of some transcendent God are, according to Feuerbach, only human projections and wishful imaginative pictures. Christianity can, therefore, only be of any serious interest if all its theological and metaphysical remainders are exchanged to a true understanding of what it means to be truly human. (Ahlberg 1951: 172–7.)

De Coubertin's creation, the modern Olympic movement, is basically and by choice a secular religion of humanity, all in line with the ideas of Comte and Feuerbach. His vision of full manhood and societies in progress as something that at best would grow in the tension of belonging to a nation and being engaged in international co-operation, all in order to visualize the ability of the most talented young adult men's and race's performances in the sporting fields, was for de Coubertin the only way of both understanding and developing a sense of holiness:

To achieve these goals in our secular age, only one religion was open to us. The national flag, the symbol of modern patriotism being raised on the pole of victory to honour the winning athlete—that was what would keep the faith alive at the newly rekindled hearth. (de Coubertin 2000: 573.)

It is important to notice that the religious aspect that is entailed in de Coubertin's vision of Olympism never gets any substance from metaphysical or transcendental horizons. The only religious experience possible is immanent, and it is articulating the true humanity, the human individual and its view of accompanying society of natural fullness and harmonious balance (see also Krüger 1981: 185–9).

Some conclusions

My main argument in this article states, in short, that one needs to look more closely at the newly developed understanding of religion and secularization in the new fluid role it has for many people today, and that religion is seen as part of a need to build up an individual, identity-based narrative. From this perspective it is interesting to note that both the characteristics of postmodern religiosity and the ideology of the modern sports movement point in the same direction: sport can function as a religious sentiment. Both have a seriousness that can be classified as religious, at least in a functional way, towards health, well-being, self-perfection, strength, vitality and beauty—goals which modern society offers as something attainable by all.

In the midst of this secularized, this-worldly, immanent and attainable religion stands the notion of the perfect body, the symbol for both control and beauty, for well-being and power of will. The struggle for bodily perfection is, no doubt, an adventurism in itself. While striving at perfection the awareness of imperfection is constantly at hand. But the driving force—‘I can make it’—is totally in line with the sense of responsibility for building up one’s own identity-based view of life, reflected in one’s need for a conscious lifestyle communicating one’s own struggle for certainty in a fluid, more or less chaotic world. In a postmodern situation, people, where they feel that religious sentiments can be used in a different way, in spite of what the traditional religious authorities says, surely do not need religious authorities to tell them about deficiencies of human life. What they need, according to Zygmunt Bauman (1999: 243), is assurances that they *can make* and ideas for *how to make* it. And for this, even religious resources are of interest, but with a new authority: oneself, guided by the individual strive for well-being and perfection.

From this fluid postmodern sentiment, the Olympism of Pierre de Coubertin is more than well-suited to the postmodern individualist, mostly as an inspirational resource for human creativity. And it is easy to understand why the sports culture, especially at the elite level, is one of the most prominent driving forces, both in visualizing the idea of human perfection, achievements, the power of will, determination and similar things, and making images of the successful personality with lots of potential in commercial marketing. Not only is well-being and striving for it appreciated as a core value of today, it is also potentially lucrative, business-wise, which is clearly reflected in elite sports culture in our western world.

The most important change in mentality from the days of de Coubertin is that when he suggested that a sportsman, 'by chiseling his body through exercise as a sculptor does a statue, . . . the modern athlete honours his country, his race and his flag' (de Coubertin 2000: 580), this seems to be quite a long way out of date. The slogan of today would be more truthful if it were to state that by chiseling his body through exercise as a sculptor does a statue, the modern individual honours—himself. But, one can still, with the notions made by Hervieu-Léger, maintain that her distinction between 'secular sacred' and 'religion' is plausible. The body as religion may still be seen as a doubtful path to salvation. At least in its very individualistic, atomistic setting, one can argue that it has very little to do with religions that emphasize life in a community-orientated and relational manner is at the heart of a religious life.

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