

BOOK REVIEW

Passion Plays: How Religion Shaped Sports in North America

by Randall Balmer

Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2022, 177 pages

Passion Plays is both an excellent piece of scholarship and an interesting, brief, and accessible read, with both helpful geographical charts that aid understanding and illustrative images that assist in bringing the text to life. The book's author, Professor Randall Balmer, provides a concise socio-historical analysis of the sport-religion symbiosis in North America that focuses on the evolution of the four major team sports—baseball, football, hockey, and basketball. In some ways, Balmer follows other notable scholars that have examined the complex relationship between sporting and religious institutions in North America during the past 50 years, for instance, Michael Novak, Joseph Price, Charles Prebish, Clifford Putney, James Mathisen, Shirl Hoffman, Patrick Kelly, William Baker, and more recently, Paul Emory Putz (2024), Matt Hoven, John White, Steven Overmann, and Jeffrey Scholes. Leading secular sport sociology journals have also started to publish related work (Shilling 2014; Gibbons 2020; Upenieks et al. 2025).

These analyses have variously examined the North American sports-faith dyad, deploying a variety of disciplinary perspectives—theological, sociological, psychological, historical, and philosophical. A relatively common trend in this now burgeoning literature (in addition to examining the ideology of “Muscular Christianity”) has been to conceptualize North American sports as a surrogate/civil/natural/popular religion, with some commentators even suggesting that sports *themselves* can offer the participant access to the divine (e.g., Prebish). Recognizing these tendencies in past scholarship, Balmer clearly sets out his stall in his introductory comments:

Passion Plays argues that sports have evolved into a phenomenon that generates at least as much passion as traditional religion. Drawing on indices of popularity and devotion, I will suggest that especially among white males, the devotion to sports has eclipsed allegiance to traditional expressions of religion. To be clear, I am not arguing that sports is a religion in any conventional sense of the word, even though there are family resemblances between the two. Team sports may provide a sense of community, perhaps, or take on some of the trappings of religion—processions, sacred space, pilgrimage—but sport does not forgive sins or grant salvation.

From my understanding of the existing and emerging literature in the sport-faith field, a field that during the past two decades has spawned many books, the *International Journal of Sports and Religion* (The Catholic University of America Press) and several journal Special

Editions—for example, recently, the *International Journal of the History of Sport, Practical Theology, Sport in Society, Religions*, and the *Journal of Disability and Religion*—the unique contribution of this book is twofold:

- (i) It examines, demythologizes, and charts the “historical origins” of the four team sports that have emerged in North America—baseball, football, hockey, and basketball. Most analyses of this type focus on the “big three” North American sports, excluding hockey, and typically do not provide much detail and nuance regarding the historical roots of each sport form.
- (ii) In addition to exploring the role of religious institutions and ideas regards the historical development and growth of four North American team sports, over the last 130 years or so—the main thesis of the text—the author skillfully weaves into the narrative the commensurate social, cultural, political, militaristic, and ideological trends of the age, not least, urbanization, the Great Migration, American exceptionalism, Title IX (1972), industrialization, nationalism, mass media and the digital economy, the gender wars, the assimilation of Indigenous peoples, Jim Crow racism, and the erroneous idea that sports *always* helps to develop positive and desirable character attributes (mainly in men) with a view to military recruitment and/or social control.

The chapter titles reflect this second unique contribution of Balmer’s book, for instance: Ch. 1, *It Breaks Your Heart: The Industrial Revolution and the Origins of Baseball*, Ch. 2, *A Great Moral Force: The Civil War and the Origins of Football*, Ch. 3, *Soul of the Nation: The Canadian Confederation and the Origins of Hockey*, and Ch 4., *A Labyrinth of Wanderings: Urbanization and the Origins of Basketball*. Fascinating biographical data about the founders and pioneers of each of the four North American team sports is effectively used to “set the scene” at the start of each chapter. These vignettes provide an interesting and informative backdrop to the explanation of the conceptual, structural, and regulatory development of the sports in question, and the evolution of their respective governing bodies. While Balmer illustrates that there is significant controversy surrounding the origins, myths, and pioneers of three of the four sports that he examines, this is not so with basketball.

During his lifetime, the undisputed founder of basketball, Canadian James Naismith (1861-1939), became a globally renowned figure in the sporting world. Early on in his career, he formed an enduring friendship with Alonzo Stagg (1862-1965), one of the foremost American “Muscular Christians” who embodied and championed the sport-faith narrative. Stagg, a theology student, athlete, and football coach at the University of Chicago and the International YMCA training school (now called Springfield College)—the location, where Naismith used ‘two old peach baskets’ and a soccer ball to create basketball, as we know it today—held Naismith, his collaborator and friend, in high esteem, saying that he was the “inventor of basket-ball, medical doctor, Presbyterian minister, tee-totaller, all-round athlete, non-smoker, and owner of vocabulary without cuss words” (115). With Stagg’s endorsement, Naismith progressed from

being a student and instructor at the International YMCA training school to securing a dual role at the University of Kansas, where he worked as the campus chaplain and director of athletics, a position which personified “the twin emphases of Muscular Christianity: religion and sports” (115). This is, I presume, relatively speaking, why the author provides significant biographical data about the founder of basketball, while also highlighting that the pioneers of hockey, baseball, and football had been heavily influenced by religious beliefs and trends of the age.

Naismith, as something of a sport-faith pioneer, went on to gain national and global influence in the sports world (and some would argue the religious sphere). This was demonstrated, for instance, by his invitation to be the “guest of honor” at the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games. Balmer tells us that Naismith “would later remember it as the greatest moment of his life” (116). When the teams representing twenty-one countries filed past him in his honor, the Presbyterian minister was deeply moved, shedding tears. One of the things I like most about this book is details such as this, which punctuate each chapter and provide nuanced insights into the thinking and motivations of the founders of each of the four sports covered in this text.

There is much more that could be said in praise of this slim volume, a book which is ideally suited to a range of introductory courses, such as, sport and faith, religious studies, sports history, cultural studies, sociology of sports, and American history. In addition to the socio-history outlining the relationship between sports and religion in North America, the many critical biographical insights and examples across the four sports (e.g., Greg Page, Jackie Robinson, Colin Kaepernick, LeBron James, and Kevin Durant) that are focused on the complex intersections between race, religion, and sports would be attractive and instructive to undergraduate students and scholars alike. In conclusion, the author nicely summarizes his exploration of “how religion shaped sports in North America” (the subtitle of his book):

Clearly, the passion for team sports is fulfilling some need in contemporary society—the search for escape or community or transcendence. In many ways, sports supersede religion in twenty-first-century North America. It invites our allegiance and devotion. It is susceptible to charismatic personalities. Like religion, sports is capable of social amelioration (racial desegregation) as well as great harm (violence and injury). Above all, like religion, the world of sports provides an orderly universe, one insulated from the vicissitudes and the dysfunction of the larger world. (130-131)

References

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