

SPORTS AND RELIGION

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to look at the two concepts Sports and Religion as an essential tool for development, unity and peaceful co-existence. Both of them have laid down rules and encourage team work and discipline among others. The paper will also focus on the relationship between sport and religion regarding the use of prayer in athletics and church related sporting activities. The paper further show the co-operative tendencies which exist between sports and religion and how sports could be used by religion and other related organizations.

Keywords: Christianity, sports, religion, prayer

INTRODUCTION

Sports and religion are essential tools for development, unity, stability, togetherness and peaceful co-existence among sports men and women as well as spectators i.e. sports lovers. According to Omali (2006), it is not uncommon among sports men to gather in circles to offer prayers before the commencement of the game. The players more often call on God for success.

The only time Nigerians come together without any religious and ethnic sentiment or bias is when there is competition between our GREAT country Nigeria versus other Nation and African country against other continent. Ikulayo (1993), laying credence to the functional role of sports observed that, people no longer fight wars but plays sports. It could be inferred from this that sports unites people from various strata of life.

Religion and sports are two major institutions that compose the social landscapes in the lives of many. Eitzen and Sage (1997) proposed that religious values are inherent in sport ideology. In this sense, "sport embodies religious values including character development, hard work, and perseverance, and, like religion, it promotes and inculcates these qualities and behaviours," (Bryant & McElroy, 1997, p.55). Religion and the role of religion as it pertains to sports involvement remain an area of concern throughout the nation. Today, there is great controversy surrounding issues pertaining to the appropriateness of bringing forth components of religion in workplaces, classrooms, and playing fields throughout the country (Alexander & Alexander, 2000). The issue of the legality and appropriateness of issues such as prayer within sport settings and the upholding of a "wall of separation" between religion and sports have been engulfed in a variety of legal battles in our country. Though there are differing views on the matter of sport and religion's involvement with each other, it should be apparent that sport and religion do have various common bonds. Putnam (1999) stated that the association of sport and religion "can be found in nearly every part of the sports world... Religious scholar Charles Prebish (1992b) claimed that it is both necessary and expected to look at the revolution in sport, the growing relationship of religion and sport. The relationship can be seen through the "use" of sport by

religion and the “use” of religion by sport (Coakley, 1998; Eitzen & Sage, 1992; 1997). Each of these concepts will be addressed in the following passages. Due to the fact that Christianity is the prevailing religious belief system in Nigeria, the primary emphasis of the related issues covered in this paper is focused on sports and religion. Throughout history, humanity has invented sports primarily as a means to meet socially with others to display skills and physical prowess and to entertain or offer excitement. Many early cultures like the ancient Greeks and the Indians incorporated religious and political elements into their games but there was always a desire for recreational play that eventually inspired the codification of early games and the invention of new ones.

Religion

According to Coakley (2007), religion is a socially shared set of beliefs and rituals that people use to transcend the material world and give meaning to important aspect of their lives. Religion beliefs and rituals are unique because people connect them with a sacred and supernatural realm and accept this connection on faith, which is the foundation for all religions and religious beliefs. Religion is further defined as a relation to Human being which they regard as holy, sacred, spiritual, and divine. It is commonly regarded as consisting of a person’s relation to God or to gods or spirits. Worship is probably the most basic element of religion, but moral conduct, right belief and participation in religious institutions are generally also constituent elements of the religious life as practised by believers and as commanded by religious sages and scriptures" (Encyclopaedia Britannica). Religion is thus seen in one such model where all the rules, norms, values, dogmas, truth, denomination, conviction, and principles come out with one common meaning Beliefs, Creed, Doctrine, and Faith. Because religious beliefs and rituals are shared, they can provide a basis for group integration and unity, and because they are related to the sacred and supernatural, they can be used as a powerful basis for social control on both the individual and group levels. It is partly because religions can do these things that religious beliefs have become used in certain sport context.

Sports

Sports are recreational or competitive activities that involve some amount of physical strength or skill that has a form of disport meaning a diversion and an amusement. It also has a rooted meaning in Latin which means carry away (Brasch, 1972). Although, definitions of sports vary, many scholars agree that sports are institutionalized competitive activities that involve rigorous physical exertion or the use of relatively complex skills by participants motivated by internal and external rewards (Coakley, 2007). While, other Professionals define sports as an institutionalized physical activity in which rules are fixed externally and beforehand. In its broader concept it embraces athletics, games, play, gymnastics and activities of an individual and team variety, competitive and non-competitive" (Bennett, 1975).

Role of Religion

Religion fosters friendship; most societies see it as a means of recreation. People converge in churches and mosques on days of worship to meet friends and business associates. Some regard it as a form of leisure. There is no racial prejudice as it knows any bounds; religion advocates for love, brotherhood and social cohesion: the Roman Catholic Church used Latin as a medium of worship to promote this co-existence up to mid twentieth century. This is a manifestation of religion acting as a guide to society’s moral values and winning people’s souls to the creator. Religion promotes discipline; the mind is always put to rest in a state of relaxation during the

examination of conscience. This serves as an antidote to stress and depression. Processions and pilgrimages are a way of exalting God's name and relaxing the body and mind. The role of religion could thus be summarised in the following:

- I. Is concerned with the sacred and supernatural realm.
- II. Its purpose is to transcend the circumstances and conditions of material life in the pursuit of spiritual goals.
- III. It is fundamentally rooted in faith.
- IV. Emphasises a spirit of service and love.
- V. Its rituals are essentially expressive and process-oriented.
- VI. It is fundamentally mystical and pure.
- VII. Emphasises asceticism; stress discipline, self-denial, repetition and the development of character.

Role of Sports

Sports act as physical outlets; they allow participants to work out aggressive energies and emotions through involvement in the competitive recreational activity" (Encyclopaedia Britannica). Sports are accessible ways of gaining respect and admiration through the exhibition of skill and prowess. As entertainment, they provide diversion from the demands of day-to-day living and allow the spectator to enjoy much of the experience of play without actual involvement. Sports bring co-operation among individual groups and societies. It fosters friendship. It enhances discipline through the rules and regulations in a game. Sports contribute to social co-existence. The constant and indispensable involvement of the crowd in the Nigerian Army Games is an absolute clear-cut separation between 'performers' and 'spectators'. It can evoke intense excitement and emotional commitment from individuals and troops (groups). It helps in the stress management whether as a spectator or participant. In summary, the role of sports is:

- a. To pursue personal achievement and self-promotion.
- b. To be instrumental and goal-oriented in whatever one does.
- c. To always be prepared for competition
- d. To promote and develop social co-existence.

The Co-existence of Sports and Religion

Several inherent exist between sports and Christianity (religion) for instance: character building, discipline, competition, crown, physical fitness, constant practice, mental fitness, fairness, playing according to rules, nationalism, and religiosity etc. Durkheim in his study of religion explored the functional relationship between the sacred and the profane elements in society. The extraordinary prominence given to the role of sport in the modern world may make it akin to the sacred, but it also highlights the role of the profane. Sporting activities tended to remain part of the religious feasts, festivals, and competitions began to be pursued on a regular basis outside the control of religious leaders. For instance, sport and games were under church control because of their concern for the body and soul. Sport competition was permitted only on holidays (holy days) associated with celebrations of religious rites or festivals (e.g. births, baptisms, confirmations, weddings, etc). Huzinga (1976) states that the great competitions in archaic cultures had always formed part of the sacred festivals and were indispensable as health and

happiness-bringing activities. Definite rules in primitive ball games were religiously observed to direct the winds; the bringers of life. The two teams represented earth and sky; and as not one would dare to cheat the gods, an umpire was unnecessary. No wonder that primitive man believed that sport, if not divine itself, was a gift of the gods. He was firmly convinced that "to play the game," meant to accelerate the revival of the nature and the victory of negotiation" (Brasch, 1972). Among the Zuris of Mexico, sports begun as fertility magic, to ensure survival by supernatural means. During drought, these people played particular games convinced that this would magically bring rain to enable their crops to grow. This association of prehistoric games with worship permeated with the classical period. Sporting pictures adorned the walls of Egyptian temples. The pharaohs and their nobles enjoyed sport, not merely as spectators but as participants. The Pythian Games were closely linked with the oracle of Apollo and his shrine at Delphi (Brasch, 1972). The Olympic Games centered on the magnificent temple of Zeus at Olympia; and when the ancient Olympics begun in 776 B.C the Greeks offered sacrifices and took oaths in honour of Zeus to emphasis the games' religious significance. This religious phenomenon continued to be used by Pierre de Coubertin in his writings of the modern Olympic movement. The Rastafarian movement, which started in the West Indies in the 1930s, believes in spreading their religion through the reggae music and dance. They regard all rastafarians to be followers of their god Jah and insist that the reggae dance is part and parcel of their religion. In the traditional African society, sports and religion were one functional unity. The wrestling contests of the Ibo of West Africa (Nigeria) could not take place before the oracles of the hills gave their consent through the priests and priestesses of the clan. According to Achebe (1980) the elders of the two communities involved in the wrestling contest visited the shrines and consulted their gods, offering sacrifices, led by their priests and priestesses, for blessings to ensure they won the contest. During the contest, the drummers beat their drums like those possessed and this it was believed signified the presence of the spirits who were the determinants in the results of the contest. In the modern society today, there are a number of interesting parallels between sports and religion, including the "worship" of athletes as gods and heroes (e.g. Michael Jordan, Taribo West and Sebastian Coe etc), of "symbols of Faith" such as trophies, baseballs, game balls, and sport-related souvenirs, and the charisma that is attached to the elites and leaders in the sport milieu. Sport and religion have often been used to create strong collective emotions and celebrate selected group values through rituals and public events. There are many anecdotal examples of how religion has been used to simply reaffirm and intensify orientations that lead to success in competitive sports. Hoffman (1992) challenges those with doubts on the co-existence of sport and religion by emphasizing dimensions of training and sport participation that fit well with the certain aspects of the Protestant Ethic. Athletes and coaches may use their religion as a source of psychological support as they cope with the challenge and uncertainty of competition, and as they try to find special meaning for their sports lives. Coaches may also use various forms of religion and religious beliefs to produce team unity and establish a basis for social control over their athlete. This habit is very common in schools and college sports (in some parts of the world) where special religious services are conducted prior to any crucial match. Players converging and praying or performing some rituals before a kick-off is not an unusual or uncommon sight in today's sporting competitions. Womack in Hoffman's (1992) says about these rituals that "They frequently use rituals to make them feel as if they have some control over what happens to them. The use of rituals among athletes has become so widespread that it has been described by journalists and voted by many spectators". It should not escape one's mind that rituals are grounded in religion, magic and personal habits. Moreover, ritual and

ceremony whether in religion or sport, reinforce values and beliefs. In terms of ceremony, the spectacle of the modern Olympic Games with the ritualistic and lavish opening and closing ceremonies complete with torch, oath, flags, and symbolism cannot go unmentioned. Religious beliefs and rituals can provide athletes with physical and spiritual reinforcement, relieve anxiety, help them concentrate and face competition with confidence, and supply reasons for practising and developing physical skills" (Prebish, 1984, Croakley 1994). Willy White a former gold medallist in the women's long jump explained her success in the Olympic Games this way: "I was nervous, so I read the New Testament. I read the verse about have no fear and I felt relaxed. Then I jumped further than I ever jumped before in my life" (an open interview, 1984). Not all-religious athletes' use their beliefs in this manner, but there is a tendency for some to call on their religion to help them successfully face challenges and uncertainty. Even though religion and sports have exhibited some form of social co-existence in many societies, it has not been without social inhibitions in other societies.

Among the Muslim and Hindu communities, religion controls the extent to which women can participate in sports. This is manifested in international sporting events (e.g. the Olympics) Hindu and Islamic countries seldom have women athletes or women teams because women are not permitted to expose any parts of their bodies in public. Verma and Derby (1994) in their study of sports among the minority groups came up with findings that Muslims... do not participate in sports at all and the main reason is deeply rooted in their religious obligations. "It may not be that simply professing allegiance to a religion is important.

The Use of Sport by Religion

The "uses" of sport by religion and the "uses" of religion by sport need to be mentioned. Eitzen and Sage (1992; 1997) proposed that religion has utilized sport through churches, religious leaders, church affiliated colleges and universities, and various religious organizations that are centred on sport. Hartzell (1996) noted that the involvement of sport activities can serve as a means of catching the interest of many un-churched people that might generally be reluctant to attend church, but may be much more open to sport. Furthermore, in lieu of commercial recreation, churches have provided activities that have served as a positive environment for sport and recreation which can serve as an alternative for less desirable atmospheres (Overman, 1997). In some part of the world, the relationship between churches and sport has moved from a position of opposition to that of a position of complete reversal, in which the relationship is readily embraced. In another development, many young men and women in sports business are more actively earning their living through sports. Hence, it is seems to be more paying than other forms of employment especially in the developed countries.

In addition to the aforementioned uses of sport by religion, there are also numerous ways in which sport makes use of religion. Eitzen and Sage (1997) opined that religion can be used to help coaches and athletes deal with stressful situations. For example, utilizing religious practices has been commonly implemented by coaches as a means of supplementing practical athletic techniques. Prayer activity has been found throughout professional sport, collegiate sport, interscholastic sport, and even youth sport. According to Eitzen and Sage (1997), "prayer is perhaps the most frequently employed use of religion by coaches and athletes" (p.163). Examples of issues discussed often requested in prayer may include protection in competition, prayers for good performance, and even prayer for victory. The uses of prayer have taken place in a variety of contexts as well. Some individuals see prayer as a means for being able to build

unity and cohesion. Others may see prayer as being more of a ritual. An example of such can be seen when some individuals recite the Lord's Prayer as a form of team ritual. Another example for prayer use is as a means for dealing with the uncertainties that are part of sport. Moreover, some have used prayer as a vehicle for bringing forth God's intervention (Eitzen & Sage, 1997). As such, sports are simply religion-like because both sports and religions have similar characteristics and produce similar consequences (Hubbard, 1998; Mathisen, 1992; Novak, 1976). In view of this, Ladani (1986, p.44) also observed that sport religious relationship started from the Bible where ... Jacob wrestled with the unknown (Gen. 32:24-30). (Coakley, 2007) further identified the following similarities between religion and sport, these are;

- a. Both have places or buildings for communal gatherings and special events. Most sports have stadiums and arenas where fans attend regularly scheduled games or contests, and most religions have churches and temples where believers attend regularly scheduled services.
- b. Both emerge out of a similar quest for perfection in body, mind, and spirit. Sports emphasize physical training and discipline for physical development, and religions emphasize physical control and mental discipline for spiritual development.
- c. Both are controlled through structured organizations and hierarchical systems of authority. Sports have commissioners, athletic directors, and coaches, and religions have bishops, pastors, priests, and rabbis.
- d. Both have events that celebrate widely shared values. Sports have games and contests to celebrate competition, hard work, and achievement, and religions have ceremonies and rituals to celebrate commitment, community, and redemption.
- e. Both have rituals before, during, and after major events. Sports have initiations, national anthems, halftime pep talks, hand slapping, band parades, and postgame hand shaking; and religions have baptisms, opening hymns, regular sermons, the joining of hands, and ceremonial processions.
- f. Both have heroes and legends about heroic accomplishments. Sport heroes are elected to "hails of fame," with their stories told repeatedly by sports journalists, coaches and fans, and religious heroes are elevated to sainthood or sacred status, with their stories told repeatedly by religious writers, ministers, and believers.
- g. Both evoke intense emotions and give meaning to people's lives. Sports inspire players and fans to contemplate human potential, and religions inspire theologians and believers to contemplate the meaning of existence.
- h. Both can be used to distract attention from important social, political, and economic issues and thereby become "opiates" of the masses. Sports focus attention on athlete-celebrities, scores, and championships, and religions focus attention on a relationship with the supernatural, rather than here-and-now issues that affect the material conditions of people's lives.

Therefore, the "uses" of sports by religion and the "uses" of religion by sports are shared. Some scholars argue that religion and sport, each has a unique, separate truth, or "essence". The essence of religion, they believe, is grounded in divine inspiration, whereas the essence of sport is grounded in human nature. These people later argued that religion and sport reveal different basic truths, each of which transcends time and space. People "live out" those truths as they participate in religion or sport.

Organizations using Modern Sports and Religious Belief

The prevalence of sport's relationship with religion can be seen in the form of various organizations that have been centred on linking sport and religion. Groups such as Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) and Athletes in Action (AIA) are among the various commonly found organizations (Aitken, 1992; Coakley, 1994; Eitzen & Sage, 1992; 1997; Hoffman, 1992b; Hubbard, 1997; Ladd & Mathisen, 1999). A rise in the link between evangelical Christianity and sport has occurred over the past few decades. As Aitken (1992) coined the phrase, "Born-Again sport" is quite prevalent in various levels of sport, where numerous Born Again athletes can be found in most Christian denominations throughout the World. The joint union between sport and religions has also taken place through the use of sport. Among such movements have been the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), Catholic Youth Organization (CYO), and Jewish Community Centers (JCC) (Kraus, 1984; Ladd & Mathisen, 1999).

Despite important differences between the organization and stated goals of modern sports and those of religions, many people have combined these two spheres of life in mutually supportive ways over the past 150 years (Ladd & Mathisen, 1999; Putney, 2003). Although, in most cases people with certain religious beliefs have used sports to achieve religious goals; then, in the other way round, people in sports have used religion to achieve on –the-field performance goals.

Meanwhile, society is highly sport oriented, many churches and church organizations understand look for ways to meet these interests (Morrow & Morrow, 1986). Churches provide sport opportunities including church leagues and tournaments, as well as various other sport, fitness, and recreation program activities. Among the varied uses that have been embraced include utilizing sport as a function of social service. Churches sponsoring recreation and sport programs have been provided to members, potential members, and guests, as well as members of the community at large. In line with these purposes of church sport, churches have used sport for functions such as evangelism, fellowship, church growth, and discipleship (Drinkford, 1996; Eitzen & Sage, 1997).

CONCLUSION

The combination of sport and religion strengthen national unity, church membership, self-discipline and character moulding to cope with uncertainty, to stay out of trouble, to give meaning to sport participation and Christianity, to put sport into proper perspective, to establish solidarity and cohesion among teams, and to reaffirm the rules and authority of coaches and the faith of Christians. This paper revealed various aspects pertaining to sport and religion's union, including measures by which sport makes use of religion. Such associations and their implications will continue to leave strong implications on the world of sport.

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