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Surveying the Landscape of Theories and Frameworks Used in the Study of Sport and Religion: An Interdisciplinary Approach

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Abstract

Religion and sport is a burgeoning and maturing interdisciplinary area of study. As the volume of research conducted about topics related to the interface of religion and sport, attention to sound research methods, including the use of relevant theories and theoretical/conceptual frameworks becomes essential. Scholars such as Stausberg and Engler (2014) have posited that the methods used in religious studies (including theory and frameworks) are not as rigorous as those utilized in social science related fields. The imperative then becomes to use theories and frameworks from social science related disciplines such as leisure studies, sports studies and sport psychology to strengthen scholarship in this emerging area. The purpose of this paper is to provide a review of pertinent theories and theoretical/conceptual frameworks that are commonly used in the study of sport and religion. An interdisciplinary approach is taken to highlighting and expounding on a select group of theories and theoretical/conceptual frameworks.

Keywords: Theory, theoretical frameworks, leisure, religion, sport

Introduction

In the opening lines of their book *Understanding Sport as a Religious Phenomenon: An Introduction* Bain-Selbo and Sapp (2016) stated, “the academic field of religion and sport is fairly new, having originated in the later part of the twentieth century” (p. 1). This line of social scientific inquiry addresses religions’ many collisions with sport and the broader cultures in which these collisions occur. To date, scholars have considered many of these: from the role of sport in the production of civil religions (Forney, 2007), the collision of sport, religion, and race (Smith,), to the particular experiences of evangelical women (Blazer, 2015) and Muslim athletes in the United States (Fink, 2016). In theological literature, scholars have increasingly looked at sport as a gateway to a practical theology that discloses truths about God and the sport as a function of creation (Scholes and Sassower, 2014).

Yet, apart from Blazer (2012) and Watson and Parker’s (2013, 2014) survey of sport and Christianity, relatively little scholarly attention has been directed at mapping the contours of the field of sport and religion. Therefore, in an attempt to contribute to the meta-analysis of scholarship on sport and religion, this paper will offer a review of pertinent theories and theoretical/conceptual frameworks that are commonly used in the social-scientific study of sport and religion.¹ Theories surveyed will be drawn from a range of disciplines, including recreation and leisure studies, anthropology, sociology, theology, and religious studies. This paper is

¹ In keeping with the scope and focus of this journal, the literature surveyed will be delimited to English language scholarship, with a focus on a broadly Protestant Christian traditions in the United States. Additional literature and examples will be provided but will not be exhaustive.

important because it lays the foundation for a more integrated investigation of the use of theory and frameworks in the study of religion and sport.

The Importance of Theory, Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks in Research

In all disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, theory and theoretical/conceptual frameworks matter tremendously. Deciding on the place of theory and frameworks is an integral part of the research design. Nealon and Giroux (2012) suggest that theory and theoretical frameworks help the researcher to manage opinions about a phenomenon, as well as help to encounter the reflexive or critical questions of theory (pp. 3-5).

A theoretical framework is a collection of interrelated concepts, like a theory but not necessarily so well worked-out. A theoretical framework guides the research, determining what things will be measured, and what statistical relationships will be looked for. Riddick and Russell (2008) suggest that “theoretical frameworks inform the ‘ask,’ the design of the study, the collection of data, and the way we interpret findings” (p. 70). Moreover, Russell and Riddick (2015) submit that a sound theoretical framework is essential because it serves as the ‘scaffolding’ for a research endeavor (p. 67). Similarly, a conceptual framework is an analytical tool with several variations and contexts. The concepts that comprise the framework are “building blocks for all thinking, regardless of whether that thinking occurs in everyday living, sports, religion, or science” (p. 11). It is used to make conceptual distinctions and organize ideas. Strong conceptual frameworks capture something real and do this in a way that is easy to remember and apply. In summary, the conceptual framework is a group of concepts that are broadly defined and systematically organized to provide a focus, a rationale, and a tool for the integration and interpretation of information. Usually expressed abstractly through word models, a conceptual framework is the conceptual basis for many theories.

Functionalist Theories in Religion and Sport

Historically, structural functionalism has been (arguably) the most prevalent theoretical framework employed by scholars in the area of religion and sport (Carter, 2012). Many of these functionalist theories have their foundations in Durkheim’s (1912/1995) sociology of religion and theory of ritual. Durkheim suggested that the primary role of religion in a society was to create a unified “moral community” (1912/1995, p. 44). This community was organized around “totems,” or objects and symbols socially constructed as “sacred” and set apart from the profane objects and symbols of everyday life. But the totem is not merely a symbol. Durkheim believed that by combining the social and religious aspects of the totem it can be understood as the “archetype of sacred things” (1912/1995, p. 118). It is in and through totemic relationships that things are sacralized, and it is around these relationships that religious beliefs and practices arise that define and reinforce the social order.

Sport as Religion

Scholars of religion and sport interpret Durkheim’s functionalism in several ways, but, as Carter (2012) stated, perhaps the most enduring are theories that suggest sport *as* religion.

Michael Novak (1976) was an early proponent of this theory, arguing that sport could be considered a natural religion in its own right (Obare, 2003). As Carter (2012, p. 145) put it: “by supposedly fulfilling these social functions, it is assumed, this Religion of Sport has replaced, or is in the process of replacing, earlier forms of religion.”

Prebish (1993) and later Price (2001), sophisticated Novak’s argument entrenching the “sport as religion” approach in the scholarly discourse on religion and sport in America (Remillard, 2016). More recently, Eric Bain-Selbo (2009) applied Durkheim’s theory in his book *Game Day and God: Football, Faith, and Politics in the American South*. Bain-Selbo (2009) directly applied the ritual typology of Durkheim to the experience of sports fandom, arguing that the sports team functions as the totem of a community around which the ritual performances of sport are centered. Similarly, Hiebert (2014) echoed Durkheim’s very language when he suggested that sport be considered “an alternate form of the sacred.” Ferrari (2004) has gone so far as to argue that sport, at least in the context of America, possesses a “cosmological” dimension, while Williams (2014) understood modern sport as a spiritual practice. A spiritual practice refers to the “regular performance of actions and activities undertaken for the purpose of inducing spiritual experiences and cultivating spiritual development” (Smith, 2011, p. 225). Additionally, Alpert (2015) and Bain-Selbo and Sapp (2016) have invoked Smart’s well-known “seven dimensions” framework to make the “sport as religion” case.²

Attempting to nuance the “sport as religion” thesis, a number of other theorists have labeled sport a “civil,” “folk,” “secular,” “popular,” or “quasi-” religion (Brody, 1979; Mathisen, 1992; Price, 2005; Ferreri, 2004; Mandelbaum, 2004; Butterworth, 2008). Many of these theories rely on the application of Robert Bellah’s (1967) theory of civil religion. Bellah (1967) defined civil religion as the institutionalized symbols, myths, practices, and sacred beliefs about the American nation. He conceptualized civil religion as a cult of nation that presented a normative standard of beliefs and actions by which the nation—and its citizens—could be judged. In such a schema, sport fulfills a basic part of the social order. Scholars who use these theories still stress the functional similarities of sport and religion. They have argued, “sport can function like a religion in that it meets the same needs and desires satisfied or promised by formal religion” (Bain-Selbo & Sapp, 2016, p. 2).

Sport as Ritual

While the theories in the previous section focused on the role of sport in society, this section looks at another group of functionalist theories on religion and sport which focus on the structural aspects of sport. Carter (2012) noted that this group of theories, broadly grouped under the label “ritual theory,” has been the most popular intervention in the study of religion and sport. Two theoretical interventions feature most prominently in such analyses—Durkheim’s

² Ninian Smart’s definition (though it is contested) of religion delineates seven dimensions that most religions possess in some form or fashion. These dimensions are: doctrinal, mythological, ethical, ritual, experiential, institutional, and material. See Alpert (2016) for a basic overview with relevance for the study of religion and sport.

concept of the sacred and profane briefly summarized above, and relatedly, Victor Turner's (1966) summation of *The Ritual Process*.

In a seminal essay on play, flow and ritual, Victor Turner (1974) applied his theoretical model of ritual to compare "tribal" and "modern" rituals. His excursus led him to consider the ritual role of play, work, and leisure—all within the broader confines of his dialectical theory of society. Turner understood the "flow" experience of modern sport as something which separated the subject from everyday mundane living, and as something which expressed the "deep social tension" inherent in the structure of modern society (Smith, 2017). Significantly, however, Turner did distinguish the type of separation occurring in tribal society from that occurring in modern industrial society. It was this distinction that led Turner (1974) to distinguish between the terms "liminal" and "liminoid." The liminal refers to the ambiguous space within ritual where the social order is dissolved, and ritual participants are in the middling place between pre- and post-ritual status (Turner, 1974). The liminoid reflects liminal characteristics, but in a way "resembles without being identical with [the] "liminal"" (Turner, 1974, p. 65). For Turner, liminoid activity is made possible by artificial division of labor in modern industrial society, whereby leisure pre-supposes "the domain of work from which it has been split by the wedge of industrial organization" (1974, p. 69).

Durkheim and Turner's theories have been invoked often to provide an explanation for the seemingly ritualistic nature of sport. Birrell (1981) demonstrated the utility of Durkheim's theory for understanding sport as a sacred rite of modernity. More recently, Rowe (2006) has used Turner's own liminal/liminoid taxonomy to argue (contra Turner) for the genuinely ritual nature of modern sport.

Issues with using "ritual" as a cultural phenomenon notwithstanding (e.g., Bell 1992), theories attempting to understand sport as ritual can be, for the most part, understood within the same broader context as "sport as religion" theories (Smith, 2017). A number of prominent sport studies scholars appeal to the apparent functional and structural similarities between sport, religion, and ritual. Citing an array of sport studies scholars over the last forty years, Smith (2019) stated:

Sports, according to these theorists, are pre-historic religious rituals divorced from religion content, changed and secularized by the forces of modern industrial capitalism (Guttman, 1978; Mandell, 1984; Overmann, 2011). Yet... [many] commentators insist that modern sports maintain some semblance of religious activity, latent in their ritual structure, implicit in the logic of sports (Birrell, 1981; Coakley, 1986; Korsgaard, 1990). While the "meanings" of these ancient rituals may have been lost, the "form of those activities remain, ready to take on new meanings" (Birrell, 1981, p. 354; Sansone, 1988). They function on a "sacred" register, offering relief to the mundane litany of everyday life (Price, 2001, pp. 35-36). They embody social tensions, playing out larger cultural dramas (Bell, 1997) and ritually enact the grand myths and values of modernity (Birrell, 1981; Goethals, 1990). (p. 229)

Both groups of theories under the functionalist paradigm look at how religious and sports phenomena perform similar social functions, and how they use similar strategies to do so.

Sport and Theological Frameworks

Cognizant of ongoing debates in the field of religious studies, this article separates theories from the “secular” study of religion from theories employed by scholars in the constructive enterprise of theology. Looking briefly over the history of the theology of sport, this section will highlight several of the most important works and the theoretical frameworks they employ and conclude by illustrating the impact of theological frameworks for theologically informed theories of sport.

Michael Novak (1976) is often recognized as one of the first significant theologians of sport (Watson & Parker, 2014). As noted previously, Novak understood sports as a form of “natural religion.” Secular religious studies scholars have interpreted this within a functionalist paradigm. Theological scholars, however, have often interpreted Novak through the lenses of natural theology or common grace. Natural theology within Christianity argues for the existence of God based on the human experience of natural phenomena and ability to reason. According to Aquinas (1924), natural theological inquiry occurs without any divinely revealed knowledge. Sport, within this framework, exists as a natural human phenomenon which points toward a transcendent reality, interpreted as God.

Other theologians have added the dimension of grace to these arguments, hoping to move beyond “another strident iteration of liberal notions of natural theology” (Ellis, 2014, p. 246). Ellis (2014) invoked Tillich’s (1964) theology of culture to describe the theological significance of sport as revelation made possible by and sustained by God’s grace (Fackre, 1997).³ Ellis (2014, p. 285) used Tillich’s language, casting sport as a cultural activity that communicates “ultimate concern” in which the immersive nature of sport simulates the transcendent, as “the reaching out for that which is beyond” (Ellis, 2014, p. 285). Grace, in Ellis’ conception of sport, is crucial. Ellis (2014) pointed out that the human capacity to reach out is made possible by God in the first place. In this way, Ellis (2014, p. 247) bridged the differences between Tillich and Barth and saw sport as a part of “nature” that is “always bound up together” with God’s grace. The logical conclusion of this line of thinking often evidences in an ontological position that regards sport as a sacramental good. Ellis adopts Tillich’s category of the “penultimate” to communicate this. Elsewhere, White (2011) has also classified sport as a penultimate good, and subsequently argued for the liturgical significance of sport (White, 2016).⁴ “Sports are,” wrote

³ Though Ford (1971) has argued that natural theology was implicit to Tillich’s arguments, despite his attempted qualifications.

⁴ “Liturgy” has been used in various ways to describe sport (Smith, 2019). Liturgy, in this instance, is used to reflect sacramental significance in the ongoing life of the church and world.

Novak (1976, p. 27), “a form of godliness.” Possessing sacramental significance and teleologically oriented toward godliness, sport becomes a form of worship.

Opposite of Ellis, Harvey (2014; 2016) has argued that sport is not a sacramentally endowed activity. Instead, Harvey (2014, p. 101) developed an interpretation of sport as a “liturgy of creaturely contingency.” This interpretation relies on Edgar’s (2012) classification of sport as a “negative liturgy.”⁵ Unlike true liturgy, which transforms the everyday world with transcendent meaning and significance, negative liturgy offers only “the illusion of meaning” (Edgar, 2012, p. 31). While sport may offer moments of liberation, it is ultimately unable to combat the anomie of modernity.

Harvey’s “liturgy of contingency” re-imagined sport as a negative liturgy in light of the doctrine of creation and contingency (Harvey, 2014; Smith, 2019). Harvey’s argument locates humanity as ontologically contingent upon the necessary existence of God. Humanity, then, is an “unnecessary but meaningful” creation (Harvey, 2014, p. 83). Similarly, Harvey argued that autotelicity is the essential feature of sport, so that sport is interpreted as an activity that is meaningful, but unnecessary. The correspondence between the ontological status of humanity and the nature of sport is at the crux of Harvey’s argument. Through the grid of contingency, sport is transformed into a “liturgy of divine absence” where God gives space to humanity “to experience her own freedom in a celebration of her created and contingent self, as herself” (Harvey, 2014; paraphrased in Smith, 2019, p. 226). Thus, while Edgar found sport to fall short of the ability to offer lasting meaning and significance, Harvey proposed that through sport humanity is able to experience the profound truth of contingency.

The practical significance between Ellis’s and Harvey’s positions is significant and was made evident in a panel session at the Inaugural Global Congress on Sport and Christianity (IGCSC). The IGCSC, conducted in 2016 by York St. John University (York, UK) was a response to the increase in academic research activity and practical initiatives on the topic of sports and Christianity. The primary aim of the IGCSC was to encourage global collaboration between academics, practitioners, politicians, clergy, administrators and athletes and produce quality academic and practitioner publications that have societal impact (Pontifical Council for the Laity, 2016). During the panel, two distinct visions of sport were cast, both toward the end of producing a theological ethic of sport. White (2016) offered a discussion on the sacramental possibilities of sport, which carried significant similarities to Ellis’s proposal. Harvey’s (2016) paper responded by adamantly arguing that sport is not sacramental, and that considering it to be so is to endanger sport by instrumentalizing it.

In fact, in his book Harvey provided an extended critique of various theologians of play arguing that each failed to appreciate the truly autotelic nature of sport. He showed how Keen (Moltmann, Neale, Keen, & Miller, 1972) wanted to mobilize play as a therapeutic intervention, Moltmann (1973) desired to use play as a strategy for liberation, and Johnston (1997) and Rahner (1967) cast play as a form of communion with God, or worship (Harvey, 2014). According to

⁵ Edgar, in turn, applies the radical orthodox thought of Pickstock (2000), picking up the concept of “negative liturgy” from her.

Harvey, each of these projects failed to appreciate the true nature of play (and thus sport), resulting in instrumental misuses and abuses of sport. Such instrumentalizations are widely observable: Harvey (2014) cited Deford's (1976) famous "sportianity" as one notable example, whereby athletes use sport as an advertising platform for peddling Christianity. "But," Harvey (2014, p. 113) wrote, "as with idolatrous self-importance, instrumental use of sport to the "glory of God" should be resisted." When the "ends" of sport lie outside of sport, people fail to engage sport as the "gratuitous celebration of [human] life" that it is (Harvey, 2014, p. 111). At the end of the panel, Harvey (2016) summed up the lively back and forth dialogue and stated that the primary difference in positions seemed to be a matter of difference between actualistic and participatory ontologies.⁶

Harvey's (2016) comment spoke to the importance of theological systems and the claims underlying theological articulations of sport. Just as the functionalist foundations of secular studies on religion and sport have impacted the type of scholarship in religion and sport, so to do theological frameworks used to conceptualize sport. If theological perspectives in the study of religion and sport are to continue to progress, scholars will need to critically reflect on the theoretical (theological) foundations of the field thus far. Future research will need to continue to grapple with the implications of theology for sport.

Leisure Constraints

In spite of the constraints research being anchored in the discipline of leisure studies, it has broad applicability to other disciplines such as religious studies and sport studies. Constraints research, namely leisure constraints research, has grown steadily over the last two decades. There is now a heightened understanding of constraints to leisure, including recreational sport that represents a coherent body of literature that is rife with new and emerging understandings. Jackson (1991, 2005) suggested that leisure constraints has evolved into a distinctive sub-field of leisure studies that is now appearing more frequently in the sports studies literature.

Leisure constraints were originally conceptualized as a mechanism for better understanding barriers to activity participation. The inaugural conceptual model of leisure constraints developed by Crawford and Godbey (1987) featured a hierarchical model of leisure constraints, which was later refined by Crawford, Jackson and Godbey (1991). This model identified a three-fold typology of constraints to leisure—intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural constraints. *Intrapersonal constraints* involve psychological conditions that are internal to the individual such as personality factors, attitudes, or more temporary psychological conditions such as mood. *Interpersonal constraints* are those that arise out of interaction with others such as family members, friends, coworkers and neighbors. *Structural constraints* include such factors as the lack of opportunities or the cost of activities that result from external conditions in the environment.

⁶ One example of an explicit participatory ontology of sport is Appel (2016). Since this manuscript was originally submitted, White (2018) has published an article outlining some of these disagreements more thoroughly.

Each type of constraint is relevant to the study of sport and religion. In the case of sport and religion, intrapersonal constraints might include feelings of guilt or shame stemming from one's involvement with inappropriate or taboo leisure or sport related pursuits. In Christian congregations, these feelings may emanate from breaking away from religious tradition and doctrinal teachings to participate in leisure or sport programming on Sunday. The interpersonal constraints to sport and leisure participation may also include congregational interactions within a religious setting, while the structural constraints might include certain interpretations of sacred texts, denominational doctrine, religious customs or traditions within a denomination or congregation. For example, Waller (2015) notes:

Traditional and conservative theological underpinnings of the church are frequently determinants of leisure choices and behaviors. Based on doctrinal beliefs, congregational theology is such that leisure activities that lie in tension with perceived or actual biblical teachings are labeled as sinful (p. 108).

Waller (2009, 2015, 2017) suggested that interpretations of sacred scriptures and the efficacy of individual beliefs helps to ascertain the legitimacy of perceived constraints. Furthermore, Livengood and Stodolska (2004) posit that constraints to leisure and sport participation do not exist in a social vacuum, but are immersed in the political, ideological, religious, and power structures surrounding people's lives.

Negotiation of Constraints

Crawford, et al. (1991) proposed that leisure participation is contingent upon the successful negotiation of constraints in a progressive manner. Hence, representing a departure from the earlier model of leisure constraints developed by Crawford and Godbey (1987) that suggested constraints are independent obstacles that prevent interested participants from participating, the hierarchical model ranks these three constraints within an individual's decision-making process (Anaza & McDowell, 2013). The researchers posited that the aforementioned constraints could be located on a continuum that ranged from most to least constraining. In the model, intrapersonal constraints are assumed to be the most commanding of the three constraints; while structural constraints are suggested to be the least influential.

Subsequently, Jackson, Crawford and Godbey (1993) extended the hierarchical model of leisure constraints by proposing that people are able to enjoy leisure participation because they become adept at successfully negotiating leisure constraints. They stated that successful negotiation of leisure constraints is influenced by the interaction between the strength of one's motivation and his or her perceived constraints. Anaza and McDowell surmised that "this proposition referred to as the negotiation and balance proposition, suggests that people are able to participate in their choice of leisure because their motivation to participate overcomes leisure constraints" (p. 326).

In an effort to advance leisure constraints theory, some researchers have progressed

beyond studying leisure participation as an “all-or-none” concept and, instead, are now focusing more attention on the constraints negotiation process. According to Jackson (1993), past research on leisure constraints has focused on constraints as impossible road blocks to participation, followed by an abrupt assumption “... that if an individual encounters a constraint, the outcome will be non-participation” (p. 1). Hubbard and Mannell (2001) further expanded the leisure constraint negotiation model and scrutinized four alternative models that examined the relationship of constraints, negotiation, and physically active leisure. Of the four models examined, independence model, negotiation-buffer model, constraint-effects-mitigation model, and perceived-constraint-reduction model, the researchers were only able to establish support for the constraint-effects-mitigation model. This model suggests that negotiation techniques lessen the negative effects of participation constraint. In essence, people have the capacity to modify leisure activity when confronted with constraints (Hubbard & Mannell, 2001; Son et al., 2008). The model also supports the idea that people who perceive more constraints are still able to participate and are more able to participate at a higher rate than people with lesser constraints (Hubbard & Mannell, 2001; Son et al., 2008). In other words, motivation to participate in an activity is a function of a person’s ability to negotiate constraints. In spite of existing obstacles, constraints can be negotiated to where participation can occur, especially if the interest and desire to participate is present. Mannell and Loucks-Atkinson (2005) noted, “the idea of constraint negotiation is consistent with social cognitive view that people actively respond to conditions that impede their goals rather than passively accept them” (p. 226).

Religion as a Constraint to Leisure and Sport Participation

As many religions provide practitioners with guidelines for right thinking and living (practice), they may at times operate as a constraint to sport participation. Collins (2014) in his book *Sport and Social Exclusion* (2nd ed.) addresses the power of religious institutions to not only create opportunities but also restrict them. He particularly cites Protestant Christian churches and their concern with sport participation among youth and adults at times that compete with traditional Sunday morning worship services.

Moreover, Collins elaborates the case of Islam and how sport and mosques both tend to be gendered spaces, further surmising that “exclusion from sport is real” (p. 242). Similarly, Spaaj, Magee, and Jeanes (2014) address the multidimensionality of social exclusion and its competing frameworks. In their model of social exclusion, they offer five dimensions: economic, political/legal, social, cultural and moral (p. 24). They argue that religion in many instances must be considered as a cultural exclusion when it comes to sport participation. Furthermore, citing Madanipour (1998) they state:

...the main form of exclusion from the cultural arena involves marginalization from symbols, meanings, rituals and discourses. He argues that the forms of cultural exclusion vary widely, such as that experienced by minority ethnic groups whose language, appearance, religion or lifestyle are different from those of the majority ethnic group in a society. (p. 25)

Religious constraints to leisure participation have been well documented among Chinese women (Lee & Zhang, 2010); Islamic women (Arab-Moghadam, Henderson, & Sheikholeslami, 2007; Gurbuz & Henderson, 2014; Koca, Henderson, Asci, & Bulgi, 2009; Kloek, Peters, & Sitjtsma, 2013; Stodolska & Livengood, 2006), Christians (Bailey & Timothy, 2015; Godbey, Crawford, & Shen, 2010; Livengood, 2007; Waller, 2009, 2016); and religious practitioners generally (Jun & Kyle, 2011; Walker & Wang, 2008; Wicker, Hallman, & Breuer, 2013). Similarly, religious constraints to sport participation have been largely documented among Indian (Sawrikar, P. & Muir, K, (2010) and Muslim girls and women participating in recreational sport (Al-Tawel & Ja'afreh, 2017; Ananza & McDowell, 2013; Khan, Jamil, & Khan, 2012; Mirsafian, Dóczy, & Mohamadinejad, 2014) as well as physical education and interscholastic sports (Dagkas, Benn, & Jawad, 2011). Noticeably absent from the available literature was scholarship related to religious constraints and sport participation specific to men.

Religious Behaviors, Badges, and Bans as Constraints to Sport Participation

Sosis (2006) presents an alternative framework of religious constraints that can be overlaid against sport. The obligations that religious groups demand of their members, namely *behaviors*, *badges*, and *bans*, are inextricably tied together. Religious behavior (ritual), badges (the physical manifestations of some ritual behaviors, such as tattoos or religious garments), and bans (behavioral restrictions or taboos). There is some justification for this, as many religious groups do not allow their members to select which obligations they want to fulfill and which they wish to ignore.⁷

Ritual behaviors and badges can be observed by others in the community. On the other hand, bans can only be “observed” when they are at risk of being violated. For example, the Jewish person in sports who refrains from eating in a social setting because the food is not kosher is signaling his identity and commitment to the Jewish community. Sometimes linguistic messages, such as “I don’t eat non-kosher food,” are required to signal adherence to a ban. Since bans cannot be directly displayed, they are only effective as signals when they are in jeopardy of being violated. For example, a Mormon sportsperson accompanying a friend to Starbucks or the Muslim athlete whose sponsor implores him or her to attend a business lunch during the fasting month of Ramadan (p. 67).

By decreeing that certain activities or goods are banned or prohibited for adherents, it becomes more costly to pursue those activities or acquire those goods because offenders will suffer the costs of punishment. Sosis further states:

This tax on secular activities and goods consequently encourages religious activity, making it “cheaper” and thus more attractive to those who accept a religious community’s prohibitory decrees. By raising the price of secular activities the opportunity costs for religious activities are lowered (p. 70).

⁷ At least, as an ideal of practice. The lived reality of this practice might look very different.

Distinguishing between prohibitions (bans and taboos), ritual behaviors and badges is useful since it underscores the separate processes that ultimately result in increased intra-group solidarity and commitment.

Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to provide an interdisciplinary review of pertinent theories and theoretical/conceptual frameworks that are commonly used in the study of sport and religion. Moreover, this paper was constructed to convey the importance of theory and the subsequent frameworks as an overarching part of research design; and to reinforce the need for the use of a variety of theories and theoretical/conceptual frameworks in the study of sport and religion. Stausberg and England (2014), in their assessment of the ‘neglect’ of method in the study of religion note that issues of research methods are seldom addressed at religious studies conferences, nor are methods including the use of theories and framework rigorously discussed in textbooks or academic journals (p. 3). The authors proceed to state:

...the study of religion stands in marked contrast to other disciplines, which great emphasis on training in research methods—often in the first year—and which have a strong record of published work in methods, including journal articles, handbooks and specialist volumes. (p. 3)

The implied point that Stausberg and England argue is that the types of methods, theories and frameworks that are used in social science disciplines can only strengthen research conducted by religious studies scholars. This is especially true when it comes to the study of sport and religion, which often also involves theological scholarship.

Challenges Related to the Scholarly Study of Religion and Sport

As the scholarship related to the study of religion and sport continues, there are also multiple challenges that must be addressed relative to the use of theory, and theoretical/conceptual frameworks. First, consideration must be given to the context under study and the applicability of the theory and appropriate framework(s) (Stodolska, Shinew, Floyd, & Walker (2014). Whether the point of analysis is a sport or a unit such as a local congregation, synagogue or mosque and attitudes about religious beliefs and sport, the theory and theoretical framework becomes essential. Second, theory development remains a need in the study of sport and religion. In an age of globalization, the convergence of factors such as race, ethnicity, culture, belief systems, morality and a plethora of other factors greatly informs how we view the interface between sport and religion. Furthermore, using social science-based theories such as the theory of planned behavior, rational choice theory, critical theory, marginality theory, and assimilation and acculturation theory will enable researchers to probe many of the layered questions that emanate from the study of sport and religion. For example, Nixon II (2016) argues that religious diversity in sport sometimes leads to “rifts, tension, frustrations” as well as “open hostility” (p.

124). In the U.S., those who are not Christian are often marginalized, and in the case of African American basketball players who are Muslim (e.g., Kareem Abdul Jabbar, Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf) race and religion are negatively correlated. In this case, marginality theory or critical race theory would provide a strong foundational framework to inform meaningful research designs.

Finally, the utilization of contemporary sociological theories and frameworks can potentially have a catalytic effect on the study of sport and religion. In light of the globalization of both sport and religion, theories and frameworks anchored in *globalization theory* offer new insights. Of particular interest and relevance is the work of Ulrich Beck whose “world at risk” theory posits that “risk is increasingly fundamental to global society” (Elliott & Lemert, 2014, p. 403). Beck’s research focused on questions of uncontrollability, ignorance and uncertainty in the modern age, and he coined the terms “risk society” and “reflexive modernization,” which reassess sociology as a science of the present (moving beyond the early 20th century conceptual framework); and to provide a counterpoise to the postmodernist archetype offering a reconstructive view alongside deconstruction (pp. 403-404). As the intersections of religion and sport are examined, at the nexus lie questions of religious affiliation and adherence, sectarianism, nationalism, politics, race, and gender. Moving forward, it is critical that the use of theories and frameworks that be immersed in these global concerns of the 21st century.

Conclusion

It is apparent that functionalist theories dominate the field of religion and sport. Most commonly, these theories adopt variations of the “sport as religion” or “sport as ritual” paradigms. Meanwhile, theological treatments of sport have tended to ignore the theological assumptions underpinning theologies of sport. Religious studies scholars and theologians have recently started to branch out, borrowing theories and methods from the social sciences. Smith (2016) used cognitive framing and critical race theories to interrogate the relationship between race, sport, and religion at Brigham Young University. Annie Blazer’s (2015) ethnography of the “lived religion” of women in evangelical sports ministries took a critical perspective to show how some of these women mobilized counter-discourses about sexuality and sexual ethics. Very recently, Smits, Knoppers, and van Doodewaard (2017) have deployed Foucault to analyze the dynamics of power at play between governmentally, the dominant societal discourses on sport, and the religious identity of Dutch ORC youths. On the theological side of the field, Mount Shoop (2014) has employed feminist ethics and liberation theology to produce a powerful critique of modern sport. These scholars and others have demonstrated the salience of introducing new theories and methods to the study of sport and religion.

As scholars continue to study the convergence of sport and religion, more critical attention to theoretical issues and orientations is necessary. Perhaps even more importantly, scholars should attempt to critically engage theoretical and conceptual models from across the disciplines studying religion and sport. For example, how do recent articulations of affect theory pose problems for rational choice theories? Or, what are the theological implications of constraints negotiation versus an ethic of liberation? Answers to these questions will not only

serve to shape the future direction of research in the study of sport and religion but can also serve as anchor points for the development of practice.

One concluding example is in order. Sport chaplaincy is now considered a global phenomenon (Weir, 2016). However, it originated as and continues to be a predominantly Christian phenomenon. More specifically, it has been a project administered by Christian men from the United States, Western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. Applying the decades of social scientific insight from scholars working in the decolonial tradition—many of whom are people of color, and women—questions could be asked about the ways that global sport chaplaincy continues to be a colonial project, favoring the values of White Western men. Considering what is known about the intersectional nature of religious constraints to sport participation globally it seems crucial that Christian scholars and practitioners seek to ground their future scholarship and practice in theories which take these realities seriously. Our hope is that by providing a survey of theory currently used to study religion and sport, we have been able to help scholars develop more theoretically grounded and critically aware scholarship. Further, in charting out where the field has been, we hope to also provide a foundation for it to move forward. If we are going to continue to make significant progress studying the relationship of religions and sport, then continuing to expand our understanding the role of theory and the associated theoretical and conceptual frameworks is crucial.

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