Book Review


This is an ambitious book. It largely measures up to its ambition, when it could so easily have faltered, falling between the two parts of its sub-heading. This is a compliment not only to its extremely experienced authors but to its wise editors, though they modestly claim to be relatively recent arrivals in the field (p. 2). Their first chapter provides a helpful overview, a hefty eighty-page map of this rapidly developing field. The latter is worth the price of this handsome hardcover alone.

The somewhat disparate chapters cover everything from the Apostle Paul’s athletic metaphors on the historical side, to the technoscience enhancement debate on the contemporary side. To begin, seasoned Australian biblical scholar Vic Pfitzner’s specialist expertise on Paul’s athletic metaphors is wielded lightly but deftly. He helpfully contextualises Paul’s metaphors in the context of the proliferation of ancient games gatherings in contrast to much utilitarian misuse of the metaphors to justify either a winner-take-all or a moralistic approach to Christianity and Sport.

Hugh McLeod traces the mid-nineteenth-century development of ‘muscular Christianity’ from the 1840s moral panic concerning the cruel, disorderly and gambling aspects of often working-class sporting pastimes. This new ideal of Christian manhood was aimed against the righteous religious who saw sport as irreligious, sportsmen who saw religion as unmanly, and people who used sport to pursue personal pleasure without a social conscience. The 1860s–90s saw the rise of the modern sports world and of ‘muscular Christianity’ as an alternative to Christianity’s numerical feminisation. Yet by the 1890s four major areas of tension between the worlds of religion and sport were emerging: the impact of professionalism, the persistence of gambling, different ideas on the use of time (including Sunday) and the fear that sport was becoming a new religion.

Chapter 4, ‘Harvesting Souls in the Stadium’ by Shirl James Hoffman, shows how a similar shift from churches opposing sport to supporting it took place simultaneously in the United States. There was a more liberal ‘if you can’t beat them, join them’ aspect to the change. The Social Gospel movement sought to ‘sweep sport and play into the arms of the church’ as ‘a response to mass urbanization, industrialization and immigration’ (p. 134).

But the postmillennial faith in social progress ran out of puff by World War I. Human nature seemed regressive as much as progressive. Success in sports soon succeeded fair play as the key virtue for many. A similar mentality appears in many US sporting ministries and Christian colleges, which use sports champions as advertisements for the faith, despite Paul’s admonition not to prematurely put new or young believers into leadership. Hoffman argues this ‘Sportianity’ is often a form of idolatry, with participants so focused on converting individuals that they ignore the social shaping role of sport and how it could be shaped by the Gospel. As Hoffman summarises: ‘The continued
downward spiral in the moral climate of big-time sports”—in spite of its ‘unprecedented invasion’ by Christian athletes—‘suggests the futility of this approach’ (p. 147).

Part II on Contemporary Perspectives begins with co-editor Watson’s outstanding piece on ‘Special Olympians [SO] as a “Prophetic Sign” to the Modern Sporting Babel’. This begins to fill the great gap on disability sports research and scholarship from a Christian perspective (p. 167) identified in his and Parker’s research survey. It also extends the broader theme of Part I concerning how to counter the win-at-all-costs, means-to-an-end approach corrupting sport. This has also led to the marginalisation of various groups such as the working class, women, et cetera, along the way.

Watson demonstrates how, despite some importance of external rewards such as medals, winning and public perceptions, ‘the intrinsic motives of fun, friendship and relationships are by far the most important reasons’ (p. 168) for participants surveyed in the SO. SOs, especially those with intellectual disability (ID), can be seen as one contemporary prophetic sign of God’s kingdom in contrast to today’s multi-billion dollar Babel-like business of sport (p. 169). Positively, athletes with ID are a prophetic sign in their moving out of invisibility to increased visibility and publicity, developing an alternative global movement to sporting Babels for the able-bodied and minded. Their shared lives, often living together, and deep friendships are an antidote to modern heroic individualism and intellectualism.

Tracy Trothen’s ‘The Technoscience Enhancement Debate in Sports’ and religion’s role in it is written by a theological social ethicist from a postmodern, feminist perspective on transcendence. She takes seriously the subjective sense of the sacred in sport that many experience and also goes beyond a debate bogged down in essentialism. She also strives to transcend inadequate analyses of genetic and machine technologies in sport based on meritocracy, where the hardest workers win, to address more systemic and substantial issues of meaning and values, of hospitality to the other (p. 208). Trothen draws on alternative theological perspectives of relational transcendence as interhuman, irreducible difference and creativity, instead of God’s immanence in human images being presented as the opposite or invisible underside of divine transcendence, associated with women and nature. Two case studies of South African elite sportspersons (Caster Semenya and Oscar Pistorius) who straddle the boundaries of enhancement and difference are used to illustrate the need for greater nuance in these issues.

Jacob L. Goodson’s ‘The Quest for Perfection in the Sport of Baseball: The Magnanimous Individual or the Magnanimous Team?’ challenges virtue ethics’ lauding of the heroic magnanimous man unreliant upon anyone else. Instead Goodson develops an ideal corporate magnanimity characterised by charity and friendship to provide a path forward for re-thinking the quest for excellence and perfection in professional baseball. Goodson thickens up the idea of the nature of a sport, and the virtues implicit in it, by using Alisdair MacIntyre’s fruitful concept of practices, allowing Goodson to discuss why a team, and friendship, is required, contrary to the individualistic heroic ethic of magnanimity. An ‘at all costs’ approach to using steroids, which Goodson also discusses, denies the internal good of prudence and charity within the team (and even between opposing teams). It heroically and hubristically neglects the true nature of friendship as shared suffering as well as shared victory.

Skipping ‘The Vatican’s Game Plan for Maximizing Sport’s Educational Potential’, by Kevin Lixey, we conclude with Scott Kretchmer’s chapter concerning the possible compatibility of ‘Hard-Won Sporting Achievements and Spiritual Humility’. Kretchmer (p. 268) returns us to the author of the foreword, Michael Novak, whose locating of sport in
the kingdom of ends, not means, also entails a sense of spiritual exhilaration at seeing sports-people take on impossible ends, occasionally succeeding, but often extending themselves and others despite the difficulty. Can sport be part of such spiritual transformations in a secular context? Kretchmer draws again on MacIntyre’s concept of practices to show how humility as defined by various religions and sacred-secular practices and projects can encourage human enhancement within limits. However, Kretchmer’s treatment is too generic, taking the sharp edge off the differences in the traditions. Nonetheless his contribution is in keeping with the consistent concern of nearly all the essays in this excellent volume to explore the relationship between religion and sport as ends in themselves, seeking to prevent the distortions of the kingdom of means that can so corrupt both.

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