

Implicit Religion and the Use of Prayer in Sport

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Abstract Implicit Religion is encountered in the secular world and it provides human beings with a worldly quest for meaning. As an Implicit Religion, sport embraces rituals and values common to Explicit Religions such as Christianity. Prayer as an important ritual common to both Christianity and the Implicit Religion of sport is explored in this paper. The Lord's Prayer and its use in sport is discussed as it is commonly used by athletes and teams in association with athletic competition. Typically, athletes engage in sport-related prayer to seek secular goals such as performance enhancement and victory. The use of prayer in sport provides testament to the importance of sport as an Implicit Religion. However, rather than glorifying the God of the Bible, it is quite possible that the commonly observed use of prayer in sport mocks Him.

Keywords Prayer, Sport, Lord's Prayer, Implicit Religion, Explicit Religion, Muscular Christian

1. Introduction

Established religions such as Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam provide meaning to life for many [1]. Each religion is exemplified by doctrine, expected rules of behavior, rituals, and ultimate goals. Established faith-based religions can be referred to as *Explicit Religions* because the ultimate goals of the religious activity are non-secular. In Christianity, for example, individuals seek to restore their relationship with God through confession of sin, faith in the Christ, and treating neighbors as they would wish to be treated. Christians aspire to spend eternity in heaven with the creator. Though membership in a church and adhering to church doctrine may enhance one's life on earth, the definitive goal of Christianity, eternity in heaven with God, is non-secular.

Implicit Religions provide human beings with a secular quest for meaning [2, 3]. Implicit Religions encompass conduct resembling religious behavior, but it takes place in non-religious settings [4]. "Implicit Religion is a form of religion marked not by title or ritual but by a person's striving toward some ultimate" [4 p. 206]. It is concerned with what people are determined *about* rather than what they are determined *by* [5].

For example, photography can serve as an Implicit Religion. I am a passionate photographer. I exhibit a religious devotion to the pursuit of the illusive and iconic photograph. I collect wildlife and landscape photographs after much study, the expenditure of a great amount of effort, and the sacrifice of considerable financial resources. I suffer, literal disappointments and experience great joy through the

activity. I make friends through the activity and can discuss file size, ISO, aperture and software processing techniques. But, alas, photography will not likely assist in dealing with my moral failings or provide salvation, regardless of the devotion I give to the activity or the quality of work I produce.

For many Americans, the passion, devotion, and emotion once reserved for Christian worship has been shifted to sport. Mohler [6], President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary explained how:

This dramatic shift could only come to pass if the larger culture has been largely secularized. In this case, secularization does not necessarily mean the disappearance of religious faith, but merely the demotion of religious involvement and identification to a level lower than those granted to sports. Americans may not know who their god is, but you can be sure most know who their team is. (¶ 17-18)

Sport is but one of several forms of popular culture that has filled the spiritual void created by the waning of the meaning of traditional religions [7]. Society offers many endeavors that can serve as Implicit Religions. Video-games, television shows, music, and sexual gratification may serve as Implicit Religions.

Lord [4] declared sport to be an Implicit Religion. It supplies meaning in life for many [8-10]. Sport, like religion, provides belonging, reinforces values, is rife with rituals and traditions, and is purported to help participants become better people. Further, sport calls into use the trappings of traditional religions for its own purposes [11].

Prayer is one ritual that both the devoutly religious and non-religious utilize within the competitive sports environment. In fact, "Prayer is perhaps the most frequently employed use of religion by athletes" [12, p. 158]. It permeates modern athletic activity from high school teams to

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professional sports franchises [13]. What do athletes pray for? Is prayer in sport a sincere act of worship or an implicitly religious activity?

In the current paper, the topic of prayer in sport as a ritual common to both Explicit Christianity and the Implicit Religion of sport is explored. Secondly, the meaning and significance of the Lord's Prayer to Christian athletes is examined. Members of multiple Christian denominations regularly recite the "Lord's Prayer," also known as the *Oratio Dominica* (Prayer of Jesus), and the "Pater Noster" (Our Father) as a part of their worship activity [14]. Christians, agnostics, and non-deists recite the Lord's Prayer as a part of pre-game and post-game routines [15-17]. Are athletes aware of what it is that they are praying? Does it impact playing behavior? The point of view of a former college athlete is used to offer insight.

2. Prayer Defined

The act of prayer is a ritual shared by the Explicit Religions of Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and other established faiths [18-21]. As a component of traditional Explicit Religions, prayer is a believer's sincere effort to commune with a creator or supernatural entity [22, 23]. Throughout history, prayer has been the primary means through which human beings have forged a connection between God and themselves [24].

Prayer is also defined as, "an earnest hope or wish" [25]. The "hopeful" or "wishful" prayer is made in the chance that something desired will be realized. It is an act of superstition or magic, something that is said because it may bring luck, good fortune, a desired item, or a specific result. Wishful prayers are offered to a god that the petitioner may or may not believe exists, in the hope that supplications will be answered.

2.1. Uses of Prayer

The prayers of ancient people did not differ much from those offered today [26]. Ancient Mesopotamians engaged in daily prayers. Requests were made to their gods for assistance in worldly matters, receipt of abundant crops, good health, and protection. The ancient Hittites offered requests and petitions to their gods and offered prayers of praise [27]. Ancient Greeks sought fertility, prosperity, health, and safety through their prayers [28]. Petitionary prayers of ancient Mediterranean peoples often came with a promise meant to persuade the divine to fulfill their stated desires [29]. Ancient Romans even bargained with their gods during prayer [30].

Currently, individuals engage in prayer for various reasons that include: coping with stress, thanksgiving for benefits, petition for wants and needs, intercession for others, confession of sin, forgiveness, and adoration of God [31-34]. Many contemporary Christians bargain with God during their prayers [35, 36].

Prayer is important to Americans. In a recent Pew

Research Study, more than half of the Americans polled (55%) indicated that they pray every day [37]. Twenty-one percent of respondents not affiliated with a religion indicated that they pray daily. Twenty-three percent stated that they pray weekly or monthly. Only twenty-one percent expressed that they seldom or never pray. Women were found more likely to pray every day than were men (65% vs. 46%). Younger adults (45%) were less likely to pray daily than were older respondents (60%).

Members of marginalized, suffering American social groups use prayer in an attempt to gain assistance from the creator and/or to cope with difficult life's circumstances [38]. Illustratively, Pargament [33] found that women, African-Americans, and individuals from lower income levels prayed more often than males, Caucasians and individuals from higher income levels. Baker [39] found that the lesser educated, African Americans, and those from lower income levels more frequently engaged in prayers of petition. Further, members of these socially marginalized groups used prayer as a means to obtain supernatural favor and good standing with the divine. Prayers often serve as a means of last resort to seek justice and acquire desires not met [26]. Stated generally, the wealthier and more successful Americans become, the less frequently they turn to God in prayer.

A significant number of 1,137 Americans polled by LifeWay Research prayed for spurious goals [40]. Wishful prayers were offered in hopes of winning the lottery (21%), achieving success in something without expending much effort (20%), finding a good parking spot (7%), not getting caught when speeding (7%), and even finding success in something that the respondents knew wouldn't please God (5%). The Public Religion Research Institute reported that twenty-six percent of 1,011 Americans polled prayed for God to help their favorite athletic team in some capacity, and 19% believed God determines who wins and loses [41].

Prayer is important to Americans. But would God actually help someone find a good parking spot? Is it reasonable to expect God to help a team win because He was asked to?

3. A Framework for Christian Prayer

In a survey of American adults conducted by Pew Research Center, 70.6% of those expressing affiliations with a religion stated that they were Christians [42]. Though my religious experiences and observational skills are admittedly limited, I have never overheard a public prayer offered in association with an athletic event played in the United States that was not reflective of the Christian tradition¹. Therefore, in order to examine prayer associated with American sport; it seems reasonable to utilize a Christian framework of prayer.

From the outset, it should be made clear that there are multiple "Christian" perspectives on a wide variety of issues as illustrated by the existence of 240 denominations of the Christian church [43]. Christianity is not the only religion subject to disunion. Illustratively, multiple sects of Islam

[44], Hinduism [45], and Buddhism exist [20]. Disagreement amongst members of a faith can lead to the creation of new denominations and sects.

Incongruity between members of various faiths concerning theological and social issues is not uncommon. Why don't individuals affiliated with a particular religion share the same beliefs on all issues? Epley, et al. offered an explanation [46]:

People can readily recall or construct their own beliefs on an issue and can also consult texts (e.g., the Koran, Torah, or Bible) or presumed experts (e.g., an Imam or Priest) that report on God's beliefs. Like inferences about people, inferences about God's beliefs are therefore likely to reflect a mixture of egocentric and nonegocentric information. (§ 6)

The inclination toward a personal interpretation of scripture partially explains why professed Christians harbor diverse opinions on important social topics such as the death penalty, abortion, and same-sex marriage. Discrepancies within the Bible furthermore contribute to the development of multiple views on issues related to the Christian faith [47, 48].

Differences of opinion exist concerning how and why Christians should pray. Should prayer be conducted standing up or kneeling? Should eyes be open or closed? Should prayers to God be directed to Him or in the name of Jesus? Should a believer pray for miracles or accept God's will? Should prayers be said in public or in private? Should Christians pray for prosperity, success and special favor? It is beyond the scope of this paper to address all questions that could be raised concerning prayer.

The framework utilized in my discussion of sincere Christian prayer in sport was synthesized from the prayer behavior and words of Jesus as recorded within the Biblical books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. If Christians were to consider how and why they should pray, wouldn't Jesus be the appropriate role model?

3.1. Sincere Christian Prayer Requires Being Completely Present with God

Scripture makes it clear that Jesus often went alone to pray in the hills/mountains (Luke 6:12; Mark 6:46; Matthew 14:23; John 6:15), or a solitary place (Luke 5:16; Luke 9:18; Luke 22:41-43; Mark 1:35; Matthew 26:36-44). He was praying alone in the Garden of Gethsemane before the time of his arrest (Matthew 26:39-45; Mark 14:32-41; Luke 22:41-45).

Jesus stated that, when praying, an individual should, "enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly" (Matthew 6:6). In some versions of the Bible, "closet" is translated as "your inner room," "all alone," or "your most private room" [49]. The actions and words of Jesus indicate that one should be alone when communicating with God [50].

Jesus spoke openly and negatively about those who prayed

in public to make their piety plain for others to see. "But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking" (Matthew 6:7).

3.2. Petitionary Prayer is not Advocated

Ancient Greek philosophers believed petitioners missed the purpose of prayer because, most often, prayer was conducted as a business transaction [26]. Illustratively, Theophrastus posited that pious behavior was often motivated by the goal of personal profit. Plato observed that prayer activity frequently reflected the presumption that God needed human sacrifices. As such, prayer was judged to be an egocentric activity. He conceptualized God as being omnibenevolent, giving but never receiving. As such, prayers could never sway God to act in one's favor. Plato believed the goal of prayer should be enhancement of moral and philosophic virtue.

Jesus stated that petitioning God for favor is unnecessary. "Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him" (Matthew 6:8). God, by nature, is good to all. He brings rain and sunshine to both the good and the evil (Matthew 5:45). Praying for rain or sunshine is unnecessary. In Mathew 6:25-33, Jesus clarifies that when one is focused upon the Kingdom of God, the heavenly Father will provide all that is important. In Luke 11:9-12, Jesus taught that those who seek and ask shall find and receive. However, He spoke not of earthly things, but instead, provision of the Holy Spirit (Luke 11:13).

Matthew 18:19-20 seems to indicate that when two or more individuals gather in agreement in the name of Jesus that the Father in heaven would give to them what they ask for. Chaffey noted that the verses are often taken out of context [51]. Instead of being a commentary on prayer, the verses address church discipline.

If the sinning brother did not make things right in the presence of two or three witnesses, then the case was to be brought before the church. If he refused to listen to the church's decision, then he was to be thrown out of the congregation. (§ 9)

In John 14:13-17, Jesus instructs believers to pray in His name. When they do, Jesus promises that the Father will answer the prayer. The verses are often used by adherents of the Prosperity Gospel movement as proof that prayers will be answered if made in the name of Jesus [52].

All prayers are, indeed, answered. However, the answer is often a resounding no. Henry pointed out that not everything one prays for will be received [53]. We receive only what God grants us under His terms:

Whatever we ask in Christ's name, that shall be for our good, and suitable to our state, he shall give it to us. To ask in Christ's name, is to plead his merit and intercession, and to depend upon that plea. (§ 14)

Praying for something in Jesus name is not a guarantee that the request will be granted as desired. Those who believe

it does, appear to miss the meaning of the John 14:13-17.

What did Jesus ask of God? The Bible provides little insight. He asked God to take the cup of suffering from Him if it were His will (Matthew 26:36-42, Mark 14:35-36, Luke 22:41-42). He asked God to forgive those who crucified Him (Luke 23:34). The Christ asked God to keep his present and future followers from evil and prayed that they would be with Him and the Father in glory (John 17:1-26).

3.3. Prayers for Neighbors and of Thanksgiving are Appropriate

In spite of Jesus' directive to pray in private, the Bible does record seven instances in which He may have engaged in public verbal prayer as described within the following verses: Matthew 11:25-27, 14:13-23, 15:36, 27:46; Mark 6:32-46, Mark 8:6, 15:34; Luke 9:10-18; 23:34; John 6:1-15, 11:41-42, and 17:1-26. In each example of public prayer, Jesus personally directed his prayers to God, gave thanks to God, and/or prayed for others.

3.4. Framework for Sincere Christian Prayer

Based upon the recorded prayer life of Jesus, sincere Christian prayer is a sacred act. It has the following characteristics:

1. It is personal communication taking place between an individual and God done in private.
2. Prayer made in an effort to call attention to oneself, is not acceptable.
3. It *does not* include petitions for secular concerns.
4. Praying for the welfare of others is appropriate.
5. Prayers of thanksgiving are fitting.

It is not conceivable, based upon the words and recorded prayer activity of Jesus that asking God for the provision of secular concerns through prayer is appropriate. Certainly, the Christ would not advocate offering petitionary prayers for performance enhancement and success in sport. Yet, Christians and non-Christians do so on a regular basis.

4. Implicit Religion and Prayer in Sport

Within the modern sports context, prayer is one of the most commonly observed religious practices [12, 54, 55]. It has long been associated with athletic competition. In Homer's *Odyssey*, written in the 8th Century BCE, Odysseus offered prayers to the goddess Athena, seeking her assistance in the pursuit of victory [56].

Malinowski noted that as the level of uncertainty of success in an endeavor increases, the more commonly individuals turn to magical and superstitious behavior in an effort to control the outcome [57]. Illustratively, the frequency, meaning, and intensity of prayers have been found to increase as the level of competition and importance of athletic competition is amplified [58, 59]. Eitzen and Sage [12] and Aicinena [60] posited that magical and superstitious activity surrounding athletic competition abound because "luck" has a big impact upon the outcome of contests. For

many athletes, prayer is used to cope with the uncertainty existent in sport, not unlike the practice of carrying a "lucky object" or engaging in a routine/ritual before attempting a free throw.

Krieder observed that prayers offered by athletes are often equated to asking God for the provision of a miracle [61]. Examples of requests for miraculous intervention include: "God, please give me the strength to do this!"; God, if it be your will, please let us win this game!"; and God, please help me make this shot!" Praying for things to go one's way or for the realization of a miracle is not reflective of sincere Christian prayer. Instead, these implicitly religious prayers are both egocentric and secular.

Prayer unites teammates and prepares them to go "into war" together because it serves as an effective means of reducing separation, animosity and prejudice before competition [62]. There is an extrinsic motivation behind pre-game team prayers. The goal of said prayers is to enhance the performance of the team and to increase the probability of success. They are secular acts reflective of Implicit Religion.

Athletes regularly use prayer to enhance their performance and overall well-being [13]. They pray before games to calm themselves and cope with the stress and anxiety associated with potential injury [63]. They offer prayers before athletic contests, seeking God's help in playing to their full potential [17, 62]. Marbeto reported that college athletes used prayer to request excellence in performance and victory [64]. Each of these prayers are uttered with extrinsic goals of performance in mind. They are reflective of Implicit Religion, not sincere Christian prayer.

Krieder noted that athletes pray for others to perform poorly, though few would be so bold as to admit it [61]. One might infer that this type of prayer is quite common. The case of a game-winning field goal attempt provides an exquisite illustration. On one sideline, the kicking team's members hold hands and pray that the field goal attempt will be successful. On the opposite sideline, team members hold hands and pray for a failed attempt. The kicker prays that his field goal attempt will be successful. The team on defense is certainly praying for the kicker to fail. The second-string kicker may be doing so as well! Though all the participants are likely to be praying fervently, the prayers are not sincere Christian prayer. They are implicitly religious rituals. The goal of each supplication is secular at its core.

I suggest that, most often, the prayers of athletes are offered simply to get something from God: a state of calm, performance enhancement, or victory. Said prayers increase in fervency and frequency as the importance of victory and performance increase. These prayers have nothing to do with wanting to live life as God wishes athletes to live. Hoffman observed that the pressure of athletic contests creates foxhole converts [65]. Athletes offer prayers in response to experienced fears and anxieties, but once the contest begins, they often engage in behavior proscribed by scriptures.

If it is God's will that one is to perform poorly, to be injured, or to be nervous, how is asking for relief from these

states appropriate? Is not God's will God's will? Does one change God's mind by asking, questioning or bargaining in prayer? Don't athletes intentionally place themselves into competitive situations that may result in their injury? Does it make sense to ask God for safety when they do? Don't athletes choose to participate in events that may result in a loss of social standing if a loss is experienced? If so, isn't nervousness a logical consequence? Why would God take away the nervousness? Why would an athlete choose to compete and then ask God to take away the butterflies associated with the competitive event itself? What does sport have to do with enhancing one's relationship with God or one's neighbor?

4.1. Most Sport-Related Prayer Glorifies Sport Instead of God

Many believe that locker rooms and athletic fields are no place for prayer. Kelly stated that by using prayers in conjunction with athletic competition, athletes, and coaches, "glorify the game itself by invoking the name of the Lord in an otherwise insignificant instance" [66, p. 24]. Kelly strongly stated that bringing God into sporting events does nothing more than trivialize Him while glorifying sport. In doing so, faith and one's relationships to God become nothing more than props for success. Tanaka observed that the use of prayer in athletics is an obvious manifestation of civil religion and is nothing more than a self-serving activity [20].

5. Muscularized Christians and Prayer

The demands of the Implicit Religion of Sport and the Christian faith are quite at odds with one another [67]. Hoffman [68] observed:

While honesty, sympathy, and generosity are the idealized derivatives of a life lived with God, recent data reveal that immersion in a culture devoted to proving one's superiority squelches rather than reinforces these virtues. (¶ 16)

Two cannot win the prize and this *necessarily* causes conflict within a Christian athlete [69]. The sport ethic demands that athletes view opponents as an enemy and that they hold an intense desire to win at any cost [67]. If athletes are to be true to the win at all costs credo, nothing else can be important. All must be focused upon victory. Anything that interferes with the quest for success is but ballast that should be discarded. One questions whether the mind of Christ can even coexist with the killer instinct [70].

In response to the dissonance caused by trying to meet the competing expectations of Christianity and the Implicit Religion of sport, Christian athletes come to view athletic success as the means through which the faithful glorify God [71]. Hoffman observed that these athletes of God refer to their athletic activities as "praise performances" or "worship experiences," however; there is no glory without competitive

success [68]:

God is glorified through demonstrations of grit, muscularity, strategic calculation, and victory, notions that seem more derivative of the coach's office than of the Bible. (¶ 30)

The image of the Christ becomes "muscularized" for many Christian athletes [72]. To the Muscularized Christian Warrior of God, as long as a harmful or unethical action is conducted to the Glory of God, it can be justified. Hoffman [73] noted:

When the star athlete prefaces postgame interviews with a public tribute to the Lord, his religious zeal and sincerity can cover a multitude of sins. (p. 82)

Athletes often fail to consider the incongruence that exists between their sport-related and non-sport-related behaviors [11]. Fifteen of nineteen NCAA Division II Christian collegiate athletes interviewed by Czech & Bullet indicated that, playing overly hard and aggressive, and wanting to win at all costs are a part of sports [59]. Their religious beliefs did not stop them from adopting these seemingly anti-Christian attitudes or behaviors. Some Christian athletes believe their abilities are God-given and that using those talents in addition to intimidating, intentionally fouling and injuring opponents is okay... If it is done in the name of Jesus [67].

Muscular Christian Warriors of God offer prayers before games, during games on bent knees after touchdowns, and they acknowledge the creator after important plays by pointing to the heavens. There is some question, however, concerning the sincerity of their prayers. Ex-Baylor University football coach, Grant Teaff believes that athletes should have the right to pray [74], but:

... what that individual does not have a right to do is draw attention to himself. If you think every guy kneeling is praying in the end zone – I bet they're not. (¶ 2)

Kelly [61] provided a pithy directive to athletes making public display of their prayers:

Save the prayers for the locker room, or the bus, or better yet, the bedroom or some other private place where the words of thanks won't seem so much like shameless preening. (p. 24)

6. The Lord's Prayer

Members of multiple Christian denominations regularly recite the "Lord's Prayer," also known as the Oratio Dominica (Prayer of Jesus), and the "Pater Noster" (Our Father) as a part of their worship activity [14]. Christians, agnostics, and non-deists recite the Lord's Prayer as a part of pre-game and post-game routines [15-17]. Are athletes aware of what it is that they are praying? Does it impact playing behavior?

Before each match over a twenty-one-year period, my collegiate volleyball teams said the Lord's Prayer. Below, I

offer a description of how the athletes went about pre-match use of the Lord's Prayer. Then, I share a player's perspective on what praying the Lord's prayer meant to her, what it meant to her teammates, and how the prayer impacted the team's playing behaviors.

The Lord's Prayer is meant to serve as a model for prayer [75, 76]. Most commonly, the version of the Lord's Prayer I heard recited by my volleyball players was taken or adapted from the King James Bible written in 1611, specifically Matthew 6:9-13 with the words, "After this manner therefore pray ye," omitted from verse 9 [77]:

- 9 Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.
- 10 Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as *it is* in heaven.
- 11 Give us this day our daily bread.
- 12 And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.
- 13 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.

The athletes prayed of their own volition. I did not promote the use of the prayer. Nor did I participate in the prayers. I waited outside of the locker room or stood apart from the group and waited to make final pre-match comments until I saw that the prayer had finished, heard a cheer, or until an athlete came to the door to let me know they were finished.

There were times that the pre-game prayer was made near the court and I had the opportunity to witness the team's pre-game ritual from a short distance. They always held hands as they prayed.

From year to year, a word or two of the team's prayer differed depending upon the make-up of the team. Awkward moments were experienced as the prayer was first recited each year. There was usually no pre-prayer discussion, from what I could see, concerning the specific version of the Lord's Prayer that was to be used during the corporate prayer. It was discussed after the first prayer.

Over the years, the call to prayer differed. In some seasons, it seemed to be a bit of a joke, as the leader would begin the prayer, "OOOOUUUUURRRRR Father!" At that point, chatter would stop and the members of the team would join in the remainder of the prayer. In other seasons, I heard a team member say, "Okay y'all, it's time to pray," before the prayer started. There were years that the prayer simply seemed to start as a leader quietly called the group together and began to pray.

Only one member of the twenty-two collegiate teams I coached declined to participate in the group's pre-game use of the Lord's Prayer. I never asked her why she did not participate. It was not my place to do so.

I never asked the athletes what the prayer meant to them or if they understood what the prayer called for them to do in life and as they competed. I always wondered if the prayers of my athletes were sincere, or if they were simply a pre-match ritual, part of an implicitly religious routine.

It is common to see collegiate volleyball teams pray before and after matches at public and private institutions within the state of Texas. Often, teams from church-supported colleges invited our team to pray with theirs after matches.

Recently, I asked one of my former college players a series of questions about the team's pre-game prayer activity. She was a college transfer from outside the state of Texas and I was interested in hearing what she had to say about praying before games and the use of the Lord's Prayer.

Before joining the team, she had never participated in corporate prayer made in conjunction with an athletic contest:

No, I never prayed before a game before I came here. I've gone to church all my life and I was used to praying there and before meals and stuff, you know? I pray a lot, for a lot of things. Praying before a game was weird at first, but I got used to it.

In her view, recitation of the Lord's Prayer was just a part of the pre-game routine instead of a sincere effort to communicate with God:

I looked forward to praying before the games, but I can't say I was really focusing on God. We were focusing on the game; you know?

She did not believe many of the players understood what the prayer was about:

Some of the players didn't go to church, so I don't think they really knew what they were praying. We never talked about what it means.

She also expressed doubt that the prayer had any impact upon the attitudes she or her teammates had when participating in matches:

I don't think anyone thought about what the prayer requires us to do. I doubt anyone thought about the prayer once we left the locker room to play. Nobody acted like it did. I think it was just something we did, you know, to make us feel closer together.

Not a hint of sincere Christian Prayer was noted in the athlete's response concerning her team's use of the Lord's Prayer.²

7. Conclusions

Though sport does not offer explanations for many of life's greatest questions, it does supply meaning to the lives of multitudes throughout the world [7, 8, 10]. Sport is not an Explicit Religion, but it does share many of the characteristics of established religions. Because sport is a secular concern, it can rightly be classified as an Implicit Religion [3]. Just as traditions and rituals characterize Explicit Religions, so do they characterize the Implicit Religion of sport. Prayer is a ritual common to both sport and traditional religions [12, 18-21].

Human beings engage in prayer for several reasons that

include: coping with stress, thanksgiving for benefits, petition for wants and needs, intercession for others, confession of sin, forgiveness, and adoration of God [31-34]. Wishful prayers are offered in an effort to obtain benefits such as good parking places, winning lottery tickets, and even things that would displease God [40].

Committed followers of traditional religions use prayer to communicate with the supernatural [22, 23]. In the Christian tradition, communion with God is the goal of sincere prayers and the act of prayer is an explicitly religious act. Prayer, as a component of Implicit Religion, is often made to a god unknown. Secular goals are most often the purpose of supplications in the Implicit Religion of sport.

The use of prayer by athletes is ubiquitous. The frequency, meaning, and intensity of prayer have been shown to increase as the importance and level of competition increases [58, 59]. Athletes utilize prayer as a pre-game ritual. They ask for the provision of miracles [61], team cohesion [62], enhancement of performance and overall well-being [13], calm [59], the ability to avoid and cope with injuries [63], achievement of potential [17, 62], and for provision of victory [63]. Prayers offered for each of the reasons listed above are made with secular goals in mind. Regardless of whether a devout follower of the Christ or an atheist offers such prayers, the goals of the prayers are the same: performance enhancement and victory. Performance and victory are both secular concerns.

The prayer life of Jesus and the words He spoke illustrated that prayers of thanksgiving are appropriate as are those made to pursue closeness to God. Prayers seeking to establish better relationships between all human beings were also advocated. Based upon these guidelines, it seems unreasonable to believe that performance enhancement or victory would be proper motivations for Christian prayer. As such, most prayers offered in conjunction with sport participation are not to be considered sincere Christian prayer. Rather, they are implicitly religious prayers offered to the secular god of victory.

Though Christians and non-Christians alike use the Lord's Prayer as a part of pre and post-game routines [15, 16, 17], simply reciting the Lord's Prayer has very little sentient value. According to Redding [78]:

Because the Lord's Prayer is so familiar, we run the risk of reciting it automatically. We may say words unaware of their transforming meaning, unaware of what we are asking God to do, rather than praying them as an honest, intimate conversation with the One who knows us deeply and loves us completely. (Week 1)

Could implicitly religious use of the ritual of prayer in sport inappropriate?

The use of the names, images, symbols, rituals, and traditions of Native Americans for team mascots has been called into question [79]. The concern of Native American groups opposed to the practice is that inappropriate use of their culture and traditions demeans them as a people. In response, the NCAA has mandated that the use of Native

American names and logos cease on college campuses across the country [80]. Some observers believe the prohibition to be just, for the inauthentic use of images, symbols, traditions and rituals mocks Native Americans and their cultures [81].

Is God mocked when athletes and coaches use the religious ritual of prayer as a prop for success? Is He mocked when those who do not believe in His existence offer prayers to him? Is the Lord mocked when athletes ask for secular gains through prayer?

According to Finney [82], believers who insincerely use prayer mock God. If Finney was correct, when athletes offer prayers for secular concerns such as performance enhancement and victory, God is mocked. Athletes who do not believe in God, yet offer prayers to God, mock Him. When an athlete engages in prayer simply because it is customary to do so, God is mocked. And the Christian faith is cheapened [68]:

Let Christian athletes, mindful of sport's temptation to pride, shun victory celebrations and consider whether the gospel's spread is well served by on-field prayers, religious gestures, and post-game testimonies. Cheap advertisements of the faith embedded in the cheap milieu of big-time sports smack of cheap grace. (¶ 33)

The common use of prayer in sport may, indeed, mock the God of the Bible. But, unquestionably it provides testament to the importance of the Implicit Religion of sport and its secular god of victory. For some Muscularized Christian Warriors of God, the secular god of victory may be more authentic and more demanding than is the God of the Bible. To them, the use of the prayer is only a tool used to enhance performance and increase the probability of victory.

To disciples of the Implicit Religion of sport, the use of the Lord's Prayer or any form of prayer likens them to the ancients who prayed to gods unknown in the hope that supplications would result in the provision of their desires. Superstition, ignorance, and self-serving behavior are celebrated. And the god of the self, rules supreme.

Author's Notes

1. I am aware that athletes affiliated with Explicit Religions other than Christianity engage in sport-related prayers. I have simply not witnessed or heard the prayers of other faiths in my limited observations.
2. One day, I asked two coaches who were new to our program if they prayed before games in college. Both were from other states. One said, "No, we never prayed before games." The second coach replied, "No, we never prayed either." A moment later, the first coach blurted out, "Oh yes, we did pray before every game. I had forgotten." Immediately, the second coach added, "I just remembered, a guy used to come in before every game and say a prayer with the team."

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