‘I will not cease from mental fight’?: Sport and the Protestant work ethic

Sport is a serious business and is strongly influenced by secularised versions of the Protestant work ethic. To a large extent sport has lost its sense of enjoyment, its playfulness. A Christian approach to sport should relativise its importance, without trivalising it: the game is just a game.

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The simple Puritan principle, ‘work hard in your daily calling’, virtually created the modern world as we know it. To work lovingly, diligently, tirelessly was to honour God. The Protestant impulse to sacralise the ordinary, to dignify the mundane, and to judge the deed by the motive released a transforming energy in Western culture that propelled it into a stratosphere of intellectual and technological achievement.

Boyd Hilton demonstrates beyond reasonable doubt that the foundations for the economic marvel of nineteenth-century Britain were laid in both evangelical theology and a permeating ethic of freedom, trial and reward.[1] Secular self-help manuals simply cribbed from the Christians. Work was valorised, povety anomalised, and the economy flourished.

Apart from the social injustices deriving from a theory that was always too confident that God was on its side, there were subtler costs – as Max Weber and Charles Taylor separately acknowledged. Weber's more famous image of the consequences of the work ethic was that of the ‘iron cage’: a controlling, containing force that left the modern person straining for spiritual release and finding solace only in the ‘aesthetic’ and the ‘erotic’. Taylor, meanwhile, counted the cost of what he terms the ‘disciplinary society’.[2] The (largely Protestant) suspicion of pointless festivity served to wear down spiritual instincts in the West, Taylor argued, championing rationality and usefulness instead. Through movements like Romanticism, art and aesthetics have come to the rescue, but the tragedy for Christianity is that it earned a lasting association with the crushing seriousness of ‘instrumental reason’, leaving it on the ‘wrong side’ of late modern movements to restore the expressive, the emotive and the festive aspects of human culture. The Protestant work ethic was an awesome power of cultural transformation, but it came at a price: secularisation.

I have argued the same in relation to evangelical seriousness.[3] Putting a permanent question mark over the matter of ‘leisure’, represented at best a law of diminishing returns – a policy of unattainable holiness. At worst, it represented a spiritual iron cage that generated powerful forms of alienation. When a radical secularist press started to emerge in the 1850s and ‘60s, it was quite as concerned with Sunday recreation rights as science. The anti-pleasure stance of the evangelical culture was evangelically disastrous.

Few modern Christians would restore anything like the rigour of the early Victorian generation. My concern is with subtler survivals of the work ethic and the paradoxical manner in which they inhabit even leisure. By and large, contemporary Christians do not decry the time wasted in eating meals or getting dressed, as William Wilberforce did, nor do we scruple over games of cards or chess. But when we do play, we often approach it in ways that effectively reproduce the work ethic: holidays become an arena of achievement, culture is a badge of identity and sophistication, and sports are pursued with an intensity that mirrors rather than balances the demands of the workplace. Attitudes vary, of course, but insofar as sport retains a ‘load-bearing’ role in our culture – a source of identity, character, meaning – it betrays its roots in the nineteenth-century movement of ‘muscular Christianity’.

The muscular Christians, chiefly Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes, wanted to make sport a vehicle of moral development and a modern form of chivalry, as a more engaging alternative to the pressing asceticism of evangelical and catholic spirituality. They succeeded better than they could have imagined. When Pierre de Coubertin unveiled a monument at Mount Olympia in 1927, he warmly acknowledged his debt to these English founders of athletic chivalry. Sport has its classical ancestry, to be sure, but its unrelenting seriousness betrays its more recent Protestant heritage: you play to become something, to defeat demons as well as opponents. In fact, you hardly play at all.

I used to think that icons of a win-at-all-costs philosophy, such as the American football coach, Vince Lombardi, or the Liverpool manager of the sixties and seventies, Bill Shankly, represent a departure from the muscular Christian ethos. In many ways they do. But in some crucial respects they extend the muscular Christian ethos that sport is the basis of character and character the basis of sport. You build effective teams by subordinating the individual to the group, by creating a culture of sacrifice and commitment, and by instilling some sort of collective belief that the goal of victory can be achieved. The art of management was the discipline of controlling controllables, calculating risk, determining 'plays' and, most of all, ruling a restless body of young men with an iron fist. It is a cliché of many sports managers to tell the players to 'just go out and enjoy it' moments before a game. Few mean it. For if the methods of the great managers from Lombardi to Sir Alex Ferguson can in any way be gleaned from their writing, enjoyment is not one of their objectives: it is something that is tasted in the triumph of victory not in the encounter itself. This is something that is arguably true of the sports 'fan' as much as the player.[4]

It may be. It should be. The problem is that the institutionalising of the winning mentality often works against those moments of inspiration, of reckless daring, which can take sport out of the realm of the ordinary. It is not merely a curmudgeonly nostalgia that can make rugby 'legends' such as Gareth Edwards and Jeremy Guscott lament that levels of skill in the sport have in some ways declined in the era of professionalism. Rugby union has been a professional sport since 1995. Since then, players have got bigger, faster and stronger. They spend more time in the gym, drink less alcohol, and eat more sensibly than rugby players once did. But playing tactics reflect the wisdom of 'percentages' and the priority of defence. To see out the tense final minutes of a match, teams now 'pick and drive' – an unsightly operation whereby one forward picks up the ball and deliberately runs into the nearest opponent before recycling the ball to allow another player to do exactly the same. This uses up time, as well as the patience of the spectator.

The former tennis player Andre Agassi revealed in his autobiography that he 'hated' tennis, from the age of seven, when his father used to make him hit 2,500 balls a day, to the year of his retirement, aged 36, after a glittering career. His words may fail to convince you that he consistently loathed his profession, but he leaves you in no doubt that by becoming a profession, a sport effectively ceased to be a sport for him.

Reading Agassi's autobiography, or David Maraniss's biography of Vince Lombardi, is to be convinced that sport has not merely provided a home for the Protestant work ethic but perhaps its *locus classicus*. Discipline, drive and grit really do produce results. The character of individuals really does affect performance. And the microscopic details of time-management and diet can have eternal, or seemingly eternal, consequences. And yet, the whole thing can leave you cold, both as a player or spectator. Like the victorious but somehow vanquished Harold Abrahams, in *Chariots of Fire*, drowning his victory blues in a Parisian bar with his coach after the triumph in the 100 metres, modern sport can be alienating precisely when you would expect it to be fulfilling. A surprising number of elite competitors walk away. Should Christians do the same?

Given what I have said about Christianity's own part in building the iron cage of modern sport, it might seem unlikely that a Christian outlook can offer a true remedy for this relentless seriousness. The modern Olympic movement was built on the moralising arithmetic of muscular Christianity. Its motto is 'Faster, Higher, Stronger'. Christians and Nietzscheans of the world unite!

The whole idiom of British sport – conveniently, you might say – is to valorise the struggle. Although Abrahams is a Jew and his struggle to prove himself through the medium of sport is very much a Jewish one, his whole journey in *Chariots of Fire* is a mirror image of muscular Christianity and its later incarnations: you find and *justify* yourself through sport. Running was, for him, 'a compulsion, a weapon'. The final of the 100 metres was anticipated with cool dread: 'Ten lonely seconds to justify my existence.' This is powerful, and in many ways admirable, but the film very effectively conveys the hollowness of the outcome. Like the muscular Christians, who believed that sporting valour would restore errant 'Esaus' to their spiritual inheritances, making Christians out of rowers by dint of little more than their rowing, Abrahams suggests the danger of building an identity on the quicksand of sporting achievement.

In a perceptive article on the horror of retirement, the rugby player David Flatman, recently articulated the identity-shattering process of accepting that your time as an elite professional is up and the need for absolute honesty in assessing the alternatives.[5] What can Christianity contribute to the conversation?

A Christian approach to sport might be one that relativises its importance, without trivialising it – perhaps even rattling the cage to show that it is just a cage, when it is taken too seriously, while also

Notes

1. B Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought 1795–1865* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

2. C Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA/ London: Belknap Press, 2007).

3. See my book, *The Problem of Pleasure: Sport, Recreation and the Crisis of Victorian Religion* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2010).

4. Nick Hornby's classic account of the plunging emotions of a committed football supporter in *Fever Pitch* **(London: Collancz, 1992) positively scoffed at the idea that you follow a team in order to be 'entertained'. Football is much more important than that.**

honouring its virtues. Sport can teach many things about humility, vulnerability, dependence on others, and it can provide the timeliest reminders of youth, but in all these things it is more effective as play than in its bizarre late-modern role of substitute for work.

A playful approach to sport does not mean an uncompetitive one. It means that you recognise that the game is just a game, and that is its glory. Knowing that the contest is bounded, locked in space and time, and not the very struggle for your soul, releases it into a special freedom. Some sportsmen and women play as though they have grasped this, and they recover from one defeat knowing that it has not defined them, still less destroyed them. Rafael Nadal might be an example. But this ability to circumscribe the meaning of the encounter is rare, at the professional and amateur levels.

What I think Christianity can contribute is a kind of middle way between the ultimacy with which sport is sold and sells itself as a definer of identity, and the cynicism of those who consider it a glorious waste of time. Robert Johnston presents an attitude of play as a necessary antidote to a Protestant instinct for 'mastery' and 'control' that runs through the modern world, including our leisure, seeing the latter as mere preparation for work, if not work itself.[6] Trying to master everything suggests a desire to be or act like God, Johnston suggests, and he draws attention to the 'final attitude' of the preacher in Ecclesiastes, which is to recognise life's joys while they are available and not to seek to instrumentalise them for higher goods. We should accept 'the gift of happiness in the present moment from the hand of God'. Trust in God requires an attitude of play, he suggests, and this attitude will restore relish and zest to our leisure. As Johnston writes, 'To the "Protestant," the Preacher affirms the value of play in and of itself. Our play need not serve our work. It has its own consequence, however unintended. Just as the Sabbath reminds us of our dependence upon divine grace, so, according to Qoheleth, our play experiences suggest God's gracious favour as their basis' (Ecc 2.24–26).

Play, then, should not be an opportunity to demonstrate the ascetic virtues, or a mere platform for either work or evangelism. It is its own good news, in the sense of radiating a life of joyous dependence. It is worrying when one has to look to both fiction, and a not obviously Christian figure within it, to exemplify such an idea, but I think the character of Lord Lindsay in *Chariots of Fire* provides a glimpse of such an approach. Whereas Abrahams has built his identity around his sporting virtuosity, and Eric Liddell has rather awkwardly fused notions of spiritual and athletic victory, convinced that to win is 'to honour God', Lindsay offers a wonderful blend of intensity without ultimacy. What for Abrahams and Liddell is a compulsion – an extension of their deepest souls – is for Lindsay a source of unencumbered delight. He runs with freedom and pleasure, and there is no training that cannot be leavened with challenges involving hurdles and glasses of champagne. Lindsay is the only character in the film who grasps the concept of play.

While Lindsay is, of course, an aristocrat who can afford such fripperies, his freedom is no greater than that of a Christian whose cosmic certainty liberates her for that easy and unselfconscious enjoyment of the world that CS Lewis considered the mark of true humility: the ungrasping security that enables her 'to enjoy life so easily'.[7] Lindsay is not out to prove anything to himself or anyone else, and this enables him to put the sporting laurel in its box when the moment of life-defining decision arrives. When Liddell is staring at the consequences of his decision not to run on Sunday, facing a medal-less games, it is Lindsay who offers him the opportunity of winning a gold medal in the 400 metres by sacrificing his place in the event, content with his silver medal in the hurdles. He does cease from mental fight and it is his glory.

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Too often, Christian approaches to sport simply mimic the secularised versions of the Protestant ethic than run rampant in the modern world. Winning becomes an imagined platform for a gospel of peace. And too often Christians approach sport with a faint sense of guilt, feeling that either playing or watching falls outside the scope of a consecrated life and that it must be 'redeemed' by wider motives. Yet the moment we attach deeper meanings to sport we risk losing all of its meaning: we create an iron cage of duty and purposefulness which destroys the fun. Sport does contain the potential for moments of grace and transcendence but, in my experience, these come more abundantly when intensity of commitment is matched by at least a background knowledge that sport is not a matter of life and death! It does not make us better people: it is a gift. Some sports institutionalise the grimacing platitudes of the Protestant sport ethic, 'winning is the only thing', but there are plenty of sports which, to borrow another Weberian concept, have not allowed their 'charisma' to be 'routinised' into mere structure. As the Olympics approach, the challenge is not to decide either for or against sport in the totality, but to seek out those individuals and contests which carry the true flame of sporting chivalry: a conviction that it matters but there are bigger things in life. And it is precisely because there are bigger things in life that we can give thanks for sporting interludes.

5. D Flatman, 'Yes it's tough on the pitch but it will be much harder off it', *The Independent on Sunday*, 25 March, 2012.

6. RK Johnstone, *The Christian at Play* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

7. CS Lewis, *Christian Behaviour* (London: Macmillan, 1944), p. 46.