

Gospel on the Mound:
Our National Pastime and the Culture of Religion

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Introduction

This paper explores one aspect the relationship between religion and popular culture: baseball as a civil religion. In approaching this paper, I tried to combine an analytical study of religion with a structural investigation of sports and its role in American popular culture. This was no easy task.

To establish a foundation for my analysis, I sought to define religion, civil religion, and sacred space. Since no single definition is universally accepted it was important to include the perspectives of a wide range of theologians and sociologists. To help me communicate the essence of the game of baseball, I reviewed the vast collection of commentary about the game. I drew from the works of columnists like Thomas Boswell and George Will, novelists W.P. Kinsella and Roger Angell, as well as the newspaper reports, sports columnists, television highlights and other day-to-day coverage of baseball happenings.

Perhaps the most importantly, I was able to find a small, but significant collection of materials that specifically address the close bond between religion and sports. I poured through dozens of books including "God in the Stadium" by Robert Higgs, "Pray Ball," by Rabbi James Gordon, and the Joy of Sports by Michael Novak, all of which included valuable analysis of the shared language and imagery between baseball and religion. I swapped email messages with Clifford Putney, who studies the concept of Muscular Christianity and the effects of the Protestant ethic on sports, and Stuart Schimler from the Baseball Historical Society; they helped me make the historical links between sports and religion. And, Professors Joseph Price and Peter Carino, who have written extensively on the relationship between baseball and religion, provided their various writings to me and recommended other resources and contacts.

Finally, to help me frame this discussion, I poured through the vast library of popular culture references to this discussion including the movies Bull Durham and Field of Dreams and the memoirs of historian and long-time baseball fan Doris Kearns Goodwin and former Major League Baseball Commissioner A. Bartlett Giamatti. And of course, there was my own love of baseball and personal experiences studying the game. To some extent, the research for this project began on June 20, 1997, when I embarked on The Great American Baseball Trip – a nationwide driving tour, during which I attended a game at each Major League Baseball stadium. Throughout my trip, I examined the state of baseball and its relationship with the fans. I watched games from the stands, met with representatives from each team's front office, talked with members of the media, and looked for player insights on the National Pastime. I even ate a pretzel from every stadium and reported on its quality. The website where I chronicled my trip is still active at <http://www.stadiummouse.com>

PART I:

Defining Religion in the Context of Sports

Defining Religion

In order to define the role religion plays in the public sphere, it is important to “establish a working definition of religion” (McGuire 5). Of course, this would assume that a single definition for religion exists, and more importantly, that the definition is universally accepted. Neither is the case. In fact, dozens of different definitions of religion, each subtly different, help to cloud our basic understanding. Consider the elements in the definitions of religion offered by four scholars.

Emile Durkheim, a French academic and sociologist, believes that “a religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden - beliefs, practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them” (McGuire 11). Moreover, he wrote that, “phenomena held to be religious consist in obligatory beliefs, connected with clearly defined practices which are related to given objects of those beliefs” (Pickering, p. 93).

Talcott Parsons, an American sociologist, argues that religion is defined “as a set of beliefs, practices, and institutions which men have evolved in various societies, as far as they can be understood, as responses to those aspects of their life and situation which are believed not in the empirical-instrumental sense to be rationally understandable and/or controllable, and to which they attach a significance which includes some kind of reference to the relevant actions and events to man's conception of the existence of the “supernatural “ order which is conceived and felt to have a fundamental bearing on man's position in the universe and the values which give meaning to his fate as an individual and his relations to his fellows” (McGuire 11-12).

Milton Yinger, who wrote *The Scientific Study of Religion*, posits that religion “can be defined as a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with these ultimate problems of human life” (McGuire 12).

And finally, Clifford Geertz provides a functional definition of religion, noting “a religion is 1) a system of symbols which acts to 2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by 3) formulating conceptions of a general

order of existence and 4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that 5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (McGuire 8-9).

From these different perspectives, it can be understood that, at minimum, religion is (or attempts to be) based on belief. It is composed of certain axioms with respect to life which seem to be true but there is no way they can be verified: they are simply accepted without proof. They are, like the basis of any religion, the basic tenets from which all else follows.

Defining Civil Religion

The phrase ‘civil religion’ can be attributed to Jean Jacque Rousseau’s essay, *The Social Contract*. Rousseau “outlines the simple dogmas of the civil religion: the existence of God, the life to come, the reward of virtue and the punishment of vice, and the exclusion of religion intolerance... All other religious opinions,” he argues, “are outside the cognizance of the state and may be freely held by citizens” (Bellah 172). Simply, there is room for “religious” beliefs in other aspects of life.

Civil religion is easily identified in the United States. It exists throughout the systems that comprise our government, our displays of patriotism and even our efforts to combat basic social problems such as homelessness and hunger, or to promote racial equality. As Robert Bellah explains it, “a collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things” accounted for the religious content of our republic, and “while not antithetical to and indeed sharing much in common with Christianity, [it] was neither sectarian nor in any specific sense Christian” (Bellah 175).

Catherine Albanese claims that other popular forms of religion develop in ways akin to those of civil religion. She re-terms Bellah’s idea as “cultural religion,” claiming that it represents the cultural creeds and codes of a community that get enacted or dramatized in cultic ritual (Albanese 322). For Albanese, it is not surprising that sports have given people a code of conduct for everyday living. As Joseph Price writes, “if the ball field is a miniature rehearsal for the game of life, it tells us that life is a struggle between contesting forces in which there is a winning and losing side. It also teaches

that ‘success [or winning] depends on teamwork’ and that in competition ‘loyalty, fair play, and being a ‘good sport’ in losing’ are virtues” (Price, Sabbath 35-36).

The elements that comprise religion, namely the concept of belief, as well as the systems and practices referenced above, are all important to an understanding of civil religion. But more importantly, those elements must exist simultaneously in the public sphere – without specific religious tenets or a defined liturgy to act as boundaries. Those elements serve as a bridge between an individual’s private conception of religion and the society’s public endorsement of things that they believe are “religious.” And under those circumstances, almost anything can qualify as a civil religion.

Religion and Sacred Space

Among the most important elements of religion, civil or otherwise, is sacred space – how it is identified and how it is created. Edward Linenthal, a professor of Religion and American Culture at the University of Wisconsin and David Chidester, a professor of Comparative Religion at the University of Cape Town in South Africa have developed a detailed analysis of sacred space. Their definition of what is “sacred” is based on their conception of how people understand religion. They write, “in the study of religion, two broad lines of definition have been advanced, one substantial, the other situational...From [the substantial] perspective, the sacred has been identified as an uncanny, awesome, or powerful manifestation of reality, full of ultimate significance. By contrast, however, a situational analysis... has located the sacred at the nexus of human practices and social projects” (Linenthal and Chidester 5).

There are, however, a variety of views on what exactly how a something qualifies as sacred. Claude Levi-Strauss proposed the sacred is “a value of indeterminate signification, in itself empty of meaning and therefore susceptible to reception of any meaning whatsoever” (Linenthal and Chidester 6). Chidester and Linenthal interpret this to mean “the sacred is nothing more nor less than a national supplement to the ongoing cultural work of sacralizing space, time, persons, and social relations” (Linenthal and Chidester 6). Jonathan Z. Smith agrees, and according to Linenthal and Chidester “has shown how place is sacralized as the result of the cultural labor of ritual, in specific

historical situations involving the hard work of attention, memory, design, construction, and control of place” (Linenthal and Chidester 6).

From those additional perspectives, Linenthal and Chidester craft an explanation of sacred space, in three steps. “First,” they write, “we can identify sacred space as ritual space, a location for formalized, repeatable symbolic performances. As sacred space, a ritual site is set apart from or carved out of an “ordinary” environment to provide an arena for the performance of controlled, “extraordinary” patterns of action” (Linenthal and Chidester 9). “Second, sacred space is significant space, a site, orientation, or set of relations subject to interpretation because it focuses crucial questions about what it means to be a human being in a meaningful world” (Linenthal and Chidester 12). “Third and finally, sacred space is inevitable contested space, a site of negotiated contests over the legitimate ownership of sacred symbols... space is fundamental in any exercise of power” (Linenthal and Chidester 15). For Linenthal and Chidester, a sacred space is claimed, owned, and operated by people advancing specific interests – it can’t be discovered or founded like any other space.

There are different considerations when considering built environments as elements of sacred space. Philosopher Mircea Eliade argues “the sacred erupted, manifested, or appeared in certain places, causing them to become powerful centers or meaningful worlds” (Linenthal and Chidester 6). From Eliade’s perspective, things become sacred; they can’t be constructed for that purpose. But, Linenthal and Chidester believe that built environments are obviously constructed as locations of religious meaning and significance and that, “places of worship, such as churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples, have been marked off, ritualized and interpreted as specific sites of sacred space in America” (Linenthal and Chidester 13).

In short, Linenthal and Chidester allow for more commercial forms of construction to be considered sacred. As they explain it, by “extending the interpretation of specific signs, many other built environments have been identified and analyzed as sacred space in America. A preliminary inventory would have to include the following sites: cities; homes; schools; cemeteries; hospitals, asylums and prisons; tourist attractions; museums; and even shopping malls” (Linenthal and Chidester 14). In particular, built environments

depend “not only upon a symbolic conquest or construction of place,” they argue, “but also upon the temporal processes of ritual and practice, memory and narrative, and the ongoing engagement with historical factors and change” (Linenthal and Chidester 25). In other words, even a space not intended for designation as sacred upon its construction can, in time, be deemed as such.

Sports and Cultural Religion

All civil religions balance the literal with the theoretical and the public with the private. As Thomas Luckmann explains it, there are things that civil religions must contend with, simple realities they must endure. For example, “religion becomes a circumscribed and eminently visible part of social reality which includes not only founders, prophets, sacred texts, theologians, and rituals but also buildings, Sunday schools, fundraisers and church tax collectors, ministers' wives and sextons” (The Invisible Religion, Page 73).

A sport must adopt the basic form that a religion does, both physically and spiritually, in order to be considered a type of civil religion. Among the characteristics common to both religion and sports are ideas and images related to deity, faithful followers, and most importantly, belief. In addition, there are sacred spaces and ritual sites, historical texts, and well-worn traditions. Catherine Albanese compares sports and religions writing “sports and deliberate religious rituals, through their performances, create an ‘other’ world of meaning, complete with its own rules and boundaries, dangers and successes.” (Price, Sabbath 35-36). In other words both sports and religious rituals establish a sense of order. “By setting up boundaries and defining the space of the game, sports have helped Americans fit a grid to their own experience in order to define it and give it structure” (Price, Sabbath 35-36).

But, “a sport is not a religion in the same way that Methodism, Presbyterianism, or Catholicism is a religion,” writes Michael Novak, “these are not the only kinds of religion. There are secular religions, civil religions” (Novak 18). Sports can easily fulfill the role that religion plays in society if the individuals seeking that spiritual influence allow for it.

PART II:

Baseball as a Cultural Religion

The discussion of religion above focused on three important elements: beliefs, practices, and institutions. Therefore, in order to make the argument that baseball represents a form of cultural religion in the United States, this paper will argue that baseball must include those three elements.

History

Americans have historically institutionalized sport and recreation as an embodiment of national values. Baseball is no exception. Consider the influence of religion on sports during the development of the nation.

The obvious influence on sports in American society is the Protestant ethic, which emphasizes rational labor, goal-directed behavior and competitive achievement. Before 1850 most Protestant groups condemned sports because they diverted attention and consumed energy that could have been spent in the exercise of faith. Simply, sports and leisure deflected attention away from possible service to god. But when society became dissatisfied with a Victorian culture focused on domesticity and threatened by physical decline in sedentary office jobs, American men in the late nineteenth century sought masculine company in fraternal lodges and engaged in exercise to invigorate their bodies. This form of this new manly culture, developed out of the Protestant churches, was known as muscular Christianity (Ladd & Mathiesen).

As this movement flourished, it gained national attention as well. Theodore Roosevelt pushed for the “strenuous life” as a means of imposing self-discipline and reasserting the culture and interests of Protestants in America and abroad. The YMCA movement, which began in the late 19th century, was part of a larger strain in American Protestantism, which promulgated a connection between physical health and salvation. They promoted organized sports and outdoor activities like camping to build bodies able to evangelize and effect social reform.

Clifford Putney explains, “Protestant acceptance of sport occurred in a number of stages. First, there was the split between liberal and conservative denominations. Liberal denominations such as the Congregationalists accepted sports much earlier than the

Southern Methodists” (Putney). Still there was a deep division between participatory sports and spectator sports. The movement faded in the 1920s, but its basic organizations persisted. Religious institutions have used sports leagues and games to expand their evangelical outreach and to solicit acceptance by other groups.

In the 20th Century, spectator sports became more popular. Putney writes that “the YMCA, which was the first Protestant organization to push for sports in a major way, argued that since lots of people weren't working on the farm any more, they needed to exercise artificially.... The YMCA said a lot in opposition to professional sports in the first quarter of the 20th-century” (Putney).

And now, at the beginning of the 21st Century, Joseph Price explains, “there is abundant evidence of the convergence and confusion that have emerged between sports and religion in America... The blending has become enmeshed in everyday consciousness as the testimonies, rituals, and affiliations of players and fans have been portrayed in popular media, religious publications, and scholarly tomes” (Price, Sabbath 16).

Beliefs

Perhaps the most important element of religion is that of belief. Establishing an element of belief in sports, and baseball in particular, is among the most difficult of the linkages to establish.

“Sports are religious in the sense that they are organized institutions, disciplines, and liturgies; and also in the sense that they teach religious qualities of heart and soul,” (Novak 21) writes Michael Novak. In the most literal of ways, words like sacred, devotion, faith, ritual, immortality, and love, which figure prominently in the structure of belief in religion, are also among those found in the language of the national pastime. Harry Edwards, a former Sociology professor at the University of California, once identified thirteen other areas where there is overlap as well. They include:

- “Sports also has its “saints” – those departed souls who in their lives exemplified and made manifest the prescription of the dogma of the sport;”

- “Sport also has its ruling patriarchs, a prestigious group of coaches, managers, and sportsmen who exercise controlling influence over national sports organizations;”
- “Sport has its “gods” – star and superstar athletes who, though powerless to alter their own situations, wield great influence and charisma over the masses of fans;”
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- “Sport has its high councils, controlled or greatly influenced by patriarchs who make and interpret the rules of sports involvement;”
- “Sport has its scribes – the hundreds of sports reports, sports telecasters, and sports broadcasters whose primary duties are to record the ongoing history of sports and to disseminate its dogma;”
- “Sport has its “symbols of faith” – trophies; game balls, the bats, gloves, baseballs, and so forth that ‘won’ this or that game; the clothing, shoes, headgear or socks of immortal personages of sports;”
- “Sport has its “seekers of the kingdom” its true believers, devotees, and converts” (Higgs 18)

Still, all of these – the Commissioner of Major League Baseball and the individual owners of teams, the World Series MVP trophies and balls used in the pitching of a no-hitter, and even the athletes who are enshrined in the Hall of Fame or whose accomplishments are designated for eternal praise – are all literal objects. For these elements to reach a religious level, the followers must believe in the importance of their existence. A commonly used example is a communion wafer, which is regarded as an ordinary piece of bread by a non-believer, but regarded as special and treated differently from ordinary bread by Christian worshippers.

What these similarities prove, according to Novak, is that “sports are organized and dramatized in a religious way.” As he explains it, “...the origins of sports, like the origins of drama, lie in religious celebrations...[and] the rituals, vestments, and tremor of anticipation involved in sports events like those of religions” (Novak 19). In addition, he argues that sports “serve a religious function: they feed a deep human hunger, place humans in touch with certain dimly perceived features of human life within this cosmos, and provide an experience of at least a pagan sense of godliness” (Joy of Sports Page 19-20). Baseball is no exception. “Baseball claims the devotion, allegiance, indeed

fanaticism of millions of persons and it serves as a center of meaning and hope for many players and fans who look to its order to provide a semblance of significance and order in their perhaps otherwise mundane, unfocused, or disorganized lives” (Novak 65). Seemingly, if an individual believes in the power of baseball, it can develop into a religious devotion.

Practices

The practices – or rituals – that make up the game are the second critical element to any understanding of baseball as a form of cultural religion. Religions are organized and structured – the official ceremonies entail sacred vestments and defined rituals. Customs develop. Actions are highly formalized. Right ways and wrong ways are plainly marked out; acceptable behaviors are distinguished from unacceptable ones. As Novak writes, “the rituals of religion give these powers almost human shape, forms that give these powers visibility and tangible effect” (Novak 30). Baseball has all of the same elements.

The game of baseball is perhaps the most structured of all the professional sports. Everything from the core rules of baseball¹ to the exact makeup of the baseball², are all clearly prescribed in the rules of the game. Uniforms for example are monitored by the league and conform to a single design, differing only in color so as to designate city as well as home and away team. Even the breaks become central components in the action -- the number of warm-up tosses allowed by a pitcher, the distance a player may move around home plate before being considered out of the batter’s box, etc.

Columnist George Will argues that those under baseball's tutelage are especially blessed, as baseball's soothing repetition drills an especially valuable virtue. Will writes that, “the crucial baseball skills – throwing a ball fast and with movement into a small space over a 17-inch wide plate; hitting such a ball with a round bat; catching a batted ball and

¹ Three strikes per out, three outs per inning, and nine innings per game.

² “The ball should be a sphere formed by yarn wound around a small sphere of cork, rubber, or similar material covered with two stripes of white horsehide or cowhide, tightly stitched together. It shall weigh not less than 5 nor more than 5 ounces avoirdupois and measure no less than 9 nor more than 9 inches in circumference.”

knowing what to do with it – require a combination of force and delicacy, strength and precision. To exercise these skills with the consistency demanded by a 162-game season requires a remarkable equilibrium of temperament, a combination of intense concentration and relaxation. To sustain this equilibrium, baseball has developed a set of unwritten and rarely even spoken norms, mores, habits and customs. They make up a silent, almost intuitive, code” (Will 194). Susan Sarandon’s character in the movie *Bull Durham* echoes this sentiment in her own way during the opening voice-over monologue in the movie:

“I believe in the church of baseball. I've tried all the major religions and most of the minor ones. I've worshipped Buddha, Allah, Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, trees, mushrooms, and Isadora Duncan. I know things. For instance, there are 108 beads in a Catholic's rosary and there are 108 stitches in a baseball. When I learned that, I gave Jesus a chance. But it just didn't work out between us. The Lord laid too much guilt on me. I prefer metaphysics to theology. You see, there's no guilt in baseball. And it's never boring. . . . It's a long season and you gotta trust it. I've tried 'em all, I really have, and the only church that truly feeds the soul, day in, day out, is the church of baseball.”

In short, humans need organizing belief systems, rituals, and places to come together in large groups for purposes of finding safety, security, and meaning. Baseball and more traditional religions help fill that need.

Institutions

In addition to the rules and rituals of the game, the institutions that comprise the game of baseball help qualify the game as a form of cultural religion. In particular, the offices of Major League Baseball which govern the play of the game; the Hall of Fame and similar institutions that recognize that game’s history; and the fans and followers that support the teams and the players, provide that element to the sport.

The body that governs major league baseball around the world, just like the highest authorities of a religious group, sets the rules, sanctions the playing of games, and

awards the winners for their successes. The two different leagues, which equate to different denominations of a religion, recognize differently elements of the rules of play. For example, the National League allows for the pitcher to bat, while the other employs the use of the designated hitter, just as some denominations honor different deities and celebrate holidays at different times. Within each league are individual teams, which represent different congregations. Each has its own stadium or ballpark (house of worship), a unique color of uniform (vestment), and collection of supporters (devoted followers). While still adhering to the rules prescribed by the highest authorities, they do whatever it takes to represent their respective communities and win on their own.

Fans show their favorite players respect and support by elevating them to a higher level of recognition. Doris Kearns Goodwin, an historian and long time Brooklyn Dodger fan described her favorite players – Jackie Robinson, Duke Snyder, Roy “Campy” Campanella and Gil Hodges as “a pantheon of gods” (Kearns Goodwin 132). And when their careers come to an end, players’ achievements are recognized with records and remembered in baseball’s shrines. The awards for most homeruns, the lowest Earned Run Average, and the most Cy-Young Awards make up the liturgy of the game. The thousands of trophy rooms and cases gracing practically every team’s headquarters and, of course, the Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York, represents the game’s most sacred of spaces.³

What makes baseball most similar to religion, though, is the devotion shown by its fans, the game’s ‘congregation’ if you will. Michael Novak explains that, “in sports cities around the nation, millions of lives are affected by whether in the days of their youth they were privileged to cheer for winners or, good-naturedly, groaningly, grew up with perennial losers” (Novak 151). This is a feeling shared by Doris Kearns Goodwin, who writes in her memoirs that, “a sense of camaraderie grew among Dodger fans that made the experience of going to Ebbets Field unforgettable” (Kearns Goodwin 49). Later, she explains she “felt part of the invisible community of Dodger fans, linked by shared emotions and experience to thousands of strangers who, for a few hours, were not strangers at all” (Kearns Goodwin 133). Though it is a fictional account, W.P. Kinsella’s

³ Hall of Fame Pitcher once described The Hall of Fame saying “If you don't feel an aura that's almost spiritual when you walk through the Hall of Fame, then check tomorrow's obituary: you're in it”

novel *Shoeless Joe*, offered a similar analogy. Ray, the story's protagonist remarked about the character of the baseball crowd and the virtues of the sport: "We're not just ordinary people, we're a congregation. Baseball is a ceremony, a ritual, as surely as sacrificing a goat beneath a full moon is a ritual. The only difference is that most of us realized that it is a game" (Kinsella 72).

For Kearns Goodwin and many others, baseball was not just a spectator sport; it was a crucial catalyst for important life lessons. As Kearns Goodwin explains, through baseball, she discovered the power of a well-told story and the virtue of losing gracefully. Baseball highlighted both the ugliness of racism and the beauty of camaraderie and sportsmanship. And on one unforgettable October afternoon in 1955, when the Dodgers finally captured a World Championship (after years of disappointment), baseball revealed to twelve-year-old Doris Kearns the simple, sweet thrill of a long-awaited victory. Those lessons, she claims, still influence her way of thinking. For Billy Crystal, a longtime baseball fan, "... Baseball fanatics often use the sport to supply the sacred family experiences [that] religion once provided. Instead of a bar mitzvah or confirmation, seeing Mickey Mantle bat or playing catch with Dad became the seminal experiences of life." (*City Slickers*)

Ballparks as American Sacred Space

"Players, managers, broadcasters, memories. All are essential to baseball... [and] so too are distinctive ballparks." These words by famed sportscaster Bob Costas in the foreword to Curt Smith's *Storied Stadiums*, makes it clear that the discussion about baseball as a form of religion is not complete without an investigation of the game's sacred spaces. Among the defining characteristics of religious organizations are the churches, synagogues, mosques, and similar gathering places, which serve as a place for worship and a sacred space. In baseball, stadiums and ballparks serve as "houses of worship spread across the land where millions of congregates come to bear witness to the manifestation of their faith" (Higgs 18).

A ballpark or stadium, as the field on which the game is played, is a site for repeated gatherings of spiritual significance, a place of worship; a cathedral of sorts. The

cathedral metaphor for ballparks appears in *Shoeless Joe* as well. The story follows Ray Kinsella, who plows under a field of Iowa corn to build a baseball diamond. During a late-night visit to Metropolitan Stadium in Minneapolis, Ray queries his traveling companions, J.D. Salinger and Archie “Moonlight” Graham, “have either of you spent any time in an empty ballpark? There’s something both eerie and holy about it... A ballpark at night is more like a church than a church” (Kinsella 135). Philip Lowry, agrees, writing in the introduction to his celebration of 273 ballparks in the Major Leagues and former Negro Leagues, entitled Green Cathedrals, that “the more I studied [ballparks and stadiums], the more they have begun to resemble mosques, or synagogues, or churches, or similar such places of reverent worship.” (Lowry 1-2).

Ballparks and stadiums offer a connection to the spirit of the past for many fans. Bruce Weber notes in his column in a *New York Times*, “perhaps, more than any other kind of public structure – more than a theater, where one production is divorced from the next, or a government chamber, where witnesses to events of import are few – a ballpark is a conduit to history. It is a place, after all, where the past always shadows the present and where public events melt into our memories, tagging our lifelines with pay-attention-to-this-asterisks” (Weber). Peter Carino writes that ballparks promise “a spiritual solace that balances the urban and pastoral, links the present and past, and provides a place for a transcendent celebration of cultural identity in the temporary innocence of leisure” (Carino 2). In both regards, ballparks and stadiums become sacred sites where memories of the game’s most heroic moments and the individuals who perpetrated them, take tangible shape. For fans, it is a place where they can find sanctuary for their spirits.

Of course, it is not unusual for ballparks and stadiums occasionally host traditional religious events. Joseph Price highlights “the use of the baseball diamond as a wedding chapel,” when utility player Jimmy marries Millie at the pitcher’s mound as “one of the vivid scenes in “*Bull Durham*” (Price, Sabbath 28). Equally compelling is the gathering for Orthodox Jewish fans at the Oriole Park at Camden Yards in Baltimore. Each game, after the fifth inning (except the ones on Sabbaths), “thirty men or more, some wearing baseball caps over their yarmulkes, sway back and forth and chant prayers in Hebrew,” in a pantry “near Major League baseball’s first kosher food stand, which offers bagels and cream cheese, potato knishes, and, of course, the kosher version of ballpark specials, hot

dogs.” (Price, Sabbath 26). The occasion, Price explains, is the afternoon prayer time known as mincha. And recently, Yankee Stadium in New York, became the congregating point for a memorial service called “A Prayer For America”⁴ at which thousands of family members and friends honored the firefighters, police officers, and ordinary citizens killed in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Conclusion

Clearly, sports, and baseball in particular, meet the criteria for cultural religion in America.

But the question remains, can sports, and baseball in particular, substitute for “religious” ritual in the public realm?

A wide variety of columnists, academics, and fans have considered this question. “Frank Deford was among the first to identify the kind of religious power that sports exerts on modern Americans. Adapting the critique of Karl Marx, Deford suggested that, if Marx had lived at the end of the twentieth century in the United States rather than in Victorian England, he would have declared that sports is the opiate of the people, anesthetizing them to the struggles of the classes and focusing their hopes on events that project fulfillment through a vicarious form of participation and through an often delayed form of gratification” (Price, Sabbath 34). Cornish Rogers, an editor of the *Christian Century* remarked that “sports are rapidly becoming the dominant ritualistic expression of the reification of established religion in the United States.” (Price, Sabbath 35). Finally, Harry Edwards stated, “if there is a universal popular religion in America, it is to be found within the institution of sport” (Price, Sabbath 35).

But, can the opinions of these media figures, as representative as they may be in their perspectives, constitute definitive proof that baseball can serve as a form of civil religion in America? Not necessarily. There must be another situation in which baseball becomes a cultural religion.

⁴ Author Note: The “Prayer for America” took place on September 23, 2001.

Joseph Price posits that “religion has lost effective control over vast areas of cultural life that were once conducted under its watchful eye” (Price, Sabbath 43). In other words, religion no longer has the monopoly on defining reality and guiding the formation of individual personalities. Rather, traditional culture has been broken up by far-reaching changes in modern thought and life. The secular division of society has redistributed the sources of human meaning and obligation among a variety of institutions and outlooks, some religious and some not. Religion has lost its control over sports, just as many argue it has lost its total control over the sciences and arts, over politics and economics, over health care and social welfare. If you accept this argument, then you subscribe to the belief that “a religion that loses its ability to transcend the given conditions of social and personal existence remains a religion in name only,” (Price, Sabbath 43) as Price argues. And if that is the case, then the realm which religion once dominated is open to be considered by other elements of the society, namely baseball.

But how can baseball satisfy the role that religious traditions once did? Thomas Boswell writes that “baseball constitutes a small, but fundamental, province of the American mind, a backwater of our spirit to which we hide when we want a sense of traditional appetites. In our daily cacophony, the national “pastime” is one of those notes we periodically strike in hopes of hearing a hint of middle C” (Boswell, Life 3). He continues, “the game is so appealing because it is so profoundly normal and open and welcoming to us. Baseball is to our everyday experience what poetry often is to common speech – a slightly elevated and concentrated form” (Boswell, Life 6). For Thomas Boswell, and millions of fans like him, baseball serves as a religious experience because it represents the everyday comfort, guidance, and even entertainment that religion has traditionally provided.

In order to truly accept religion, one must believe that certain things are true, even when they cannot be explained through rationalization or scientific study. For one to believe that baseball is a civil religion, the same criterion applies. Baseball reminds us that there is an element of ritual in all games, and that a ritual is in itself a kind of game, played by a team within a sacred space, with special garb and implements. The outcome of a ritual, however, is not reflected on a scoreboard in hits and runs. The ritual game has a value that is more abstract. Fans are so consumed by the game they devote their lives

to their favorite teams, as parishioners do to their congregations. They read the daily sports pages in newspapers, devouring reports and features about their favorites team and players as the devoted read and re-read their holy scripture each day looking for guidance. They learn to speak the language of baseball, to dissect box scores of games, and to re-create narratives of at bats, innings, and series', just as the faithful tell of their religion's triumphs while evangelizing to the masses.

In 21st Century America, baseball indeed fulfills the definition of religion as a system of beliefs and practices by which a group of people struggles with the ultimate problems of human life. "Religion does not have clear-cut physical properties, nor are its characters readily ascertained and agreed upon" (McGuire 6). But the game of baseball does, and it serves as a public reflection of, and a catalyst for, the evolution of American culture and society. People look to baseball for entertainment, a sense of community, a sense of structure, and to live out their dreams. They look to baseball to satisfy the role that traditional religion has played in their lives.

Play Ball!

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