

Eva Orbanová
Tnava University
eva.orbanova@truni.sk

Mixing Sport and Religion in the Media

SUMMARY

In recent decades, interesting parallels have been created between sport and religion, which are mediated to humans. Sport, as a partial area of consumerism, is the bearer of spiritual and religious content. Syncretism is typical for the current post-modern religiosity, however, this has gone beyond the merging of religions. Syncretism goes beyond its traditional religious range and combines religion/spirituality with the secular area of human life. Among them is sport. The actors mediating amorphous and drifting denominational spirituality are both the players themselves and sports commentators and journalists.

KEYWORDS: secular and religious, spirituality and religion, reflexive spirituality, pseudo-religious cults, postmodern religiosity

STRESZCZENIE

Łączenie sportu i religii w mediach

W ostatnich dziesięcioleciach, między sportem a religią powstały interesujące paralele, przekazywane ludziom. Sport jako obszar w ramach konsumpcji jest nośnikiem treści duchowych i religijnych. W bieżącej ponowoczesnej religijności typowym zjawiskiem jest synkretyzm, który jednak przekracza obszar tradycyjnej religii i łączy się z religią/duchowością w świeckich wymiarach ludzkiego życia. Wśród nich ma swoje miejsce i sport. Między aktorami mediującymi amorficzną

i dryfującą wyznaniową duchowość są zarówno sami gracze oraz komentatorzy sportowi i dziennikarze.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: świeckie i religijne, duchowość
i religia, duchowość refleksyjna, kultury
pseudoreligijne, postmodernistyczna
religijność

Desacralisation is a long-term and significant feature associated with the ongoing globalisation of the world. It is evident that the sacred space of human existence is gradually being secularised. Moreover, it appears that the imaginary line between the sacred and the secular is becoming blurred. In practical terms, for example, it can manifest in closing former Christian churches, especially in Western Europe. These are, for example, promptly converted into commercial or residential complexes. There are plenty of similar examples. Naturally, this process of the sacred-secular transformation of material objects finds its analogue reflected in the thinking of mankind in the 21st century.

Despite the fact that mankind creates and thus actually seeks new and fresh alternative forms of religiosity and religious survival, it unconsciously or subconsciously accepts the elimination of the traditionally dichotomized sacred-secular space of its existence. As it has been for many centuries and even millennia of mankind's history. An effective tool for imperceptibly changing the point of view of man on the blurred or neutralised differences between the sacred and the secular is sports, sporting competitions. Among these, football matches could be seen as the most spectacular because their audience achieves the greatest numbers, often a crowd of a hundred thousand supporters. Qualitative changes in space affect all areas of human existence, including the media. Sport is a good example of a particularly attractive and also popularly hyped article, as well as an effective carrier of that transformation.

The dichotomy of the sacred and the secular

The qualitative heterogeneity of the human environment has always been an accompanying phenomenon of every human society. The dichotomy between the sacred and the secular had several dimensions. It touched the purely earthly life with an overlap to the transcendental, supernatural plane of human life. The dichotomy in the plane of immanence unfolded,

for instance, from the binarity of secular and religious objects, times, people and objects set aside for sacred purposes. This diametric polarization of the human environment created a natural starting point for religious awareness and religiosity as such. Moreover, for centuries religion itself legitimized such a profane-sacred counterpoint.

Sport and religion

A primordial example of the mixing of sport and religion in the distant past were undoubtedly the Greek Olympics. Held in honour of Zeus, the supreme god of the Greek pantheon. During the games the supreme god Zeus had the main word and Ares, the god of war, an explicit one. He had to respect the sacred time of peace, the *ékécheiria*. Currently sport no longer has such influence in world affairs, local or otherwise motivated military conflicts. Given the importance to ancient society, the popular Olympic sporting competition was also used to legitimize religion. But it also had an impact in strengthening the population's faith in the divinity of the Greek pantheon on Olympus. It was only men that had the dominant role in maintaining the social status quo through the Olympics. Only they could compete among themselves and then wear the wreath of laurel leaves for the winners.

The current mixing of sport and religion certainly doesn't have such a unifying and religious-power (brachial) ambition. It is obvious that it is difficult to address the current widely secularized society in the spirit of some unifying idea, and certainly not via a religious concept. However, it is necessary to take note of the words of sociologist Kelly Besecke, who studies a modern and interesting phenomenon called reflexive spirituality, that paradoxically "*extreme secularism returns mankind to spirituality*".¹

A unifying element rolling throughout the media landscape is thus an unspecified spirituality. It is an amorphous type of spirituality that is able to address the general population. At the same time it doesn't tie anybody to anything and is served in a light, sports and entertainment or commercial form. An example is the fashion brand Jeans with the religious addition True Religion.² In this sense, a link binding the modern phenomenon called. disneyfication. A term coined by sociologist David Lyon to reflect current lifestyles. It leaves us in no doubt that the phenomenon of sport

1 Besecke, K. 2014. *You can't put God in the box. Thoughtful Spirituality in a Rational Age*. New York : Oxford University Press, 2014. s. 7.

2 Brand Jeans. True Religion. <http://shop.nordstrom.com/c/all-true-religion-brand-jeans>, (26. 10. 2016)

and the offer of entertainment are currently and extremely efficiently interlinked.³ This unspecified spirituality is clearly manifested in the semantic mixing of sport and traditionally religious terminology. The examples abound, for instance: “*The heavens have taken mercy. And Hossa has written history.*”⁴

Paradoxically, the clergy themselves contribute to the semantic desecralization or immanentization of religion. In this case, the observation by the sociologist N. Postman is quite fitting, who points to the fact that during his appointment as archbishop in New York’s St. Patrick’s Cathedral the priest John J. O’ Connor wore a New York Yankees baseball cap.⁵ Recently the theologians from a seminary at Nitra in Slovakia demonstrated this mixing of the sacred and the secular world in a similar manner. During an Open Day they, primarily the youth and smaller visitors, danced and sang the following lyrics: “We are truly Hey, we even play hockey, we go to the gym, Mass every day, we go on tour.”⁶ In this case, sport as a immanent means of human existence, and currently an effective entertainment construct, is seen as an effective evangelistic plan. The original intention of ordaining priests, generally perceived in religions as a form of singling out an individual for sacred purposes, is taken with a certain degree of detachment. Because those initiated have no fear at all that they would lose their secular sports activities, i.e. pleasures belonging to the earthly sphere.

In this manner the semantic sacred-secular parallels are levelled out. Even the desecralization of the earthly space radically transforms awareness of the transcendent world. It relates to the eschatology of man. A good example is the wide variability of ideas about heaven and its professional designation. The innocent most commonly having a tendency, that being hockey or football heaven. Probably the most famous example of this type of thinking is the death of the Slovak hockey hero – Pavol Demitra, who played for Lokomotiv Yaroslavl.

In essence the media headlines allowed his supporters to bridge the notional initiation boundary between life and death “*Escort Pala Demitra*

3 Lyon, D. 2002. *Ježíš v Disneylandu. Náboženství v postmoderní době*. Praha : Mladá fronta, 2002. s. 22.

4 Knap, K. *Nebesía sa zmilovali. A Hossa písal históriu*. In *Hospodárske noviny*. Bratislava : Mafra Slovakia, a. s. 21. 23. október 2016. s. 8.

5 Postman , N. 2010. *Ubavit se k smrti. Verejná komunikace ve věku zábavy*. Praha : Mladá fronta dnes. 2010. s. 112. ISBN 978-80-204-2206-4.

6 Slovenský kresťanský Gangnam style. (official clip). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6UzHV8Al_BM, (26. 10. 2016).

to hockey heaven.”⁷ At the funeral the clergyman – a Capuchin priest – who accompanied the world-famous hockey player to the other world, along with a crowd of fans, paid homage to the rhetoric of the qualitative difference of a heaven of the professionally attuned. In his farewell speech he expressed confidence that they will play hockey again together in Heaven, specifically at least one period.⁸ A comparison of earthly parameters to an originally transcendental actuality, which Christian theology terms heaven was clearly heard from the lips of the priest himself. Whilst the biblical-theological interpretation of heaven is expressed in diametrically opposite connotations, which, from the spiritual-ontological standpoint, have absolutely nothing to do with earthly human life.

The spirituality of sport

For a long time now the phenomenon of spirituality does not belong to religion alone. Today, it is an extremely flexible concept, which finds its place in various areas of secular life. For example, the spirituality of work, leisure, health and, of course, there is also talk about the spirituality of sport. Naturally, even the very concept, originally associated in Christian theology with the action of the Holy Spirit, has been semantically secularized and taken on a different meaning and also a disparate connotation. These, in terms of religious studies, are related to various other forms of spirituality, which include a myriad of alternative spirituality.

This means that the concept has emerged from Christian spirituality and travels across various forms of post-modern religiosity, which is characterized by abnormal increases in cults. These reflect the mentality of today’s consumer society and fulfil it, as well as generating new needs. It is a need that is far from being just a spiritual nature, which implies that the concept of spirituality has purposefully replaced the concept of religion. It is due to the fact that spirituality reacts flexibly to the needs of people and thus more adequately corresponds to human consumption and the hedonist lifestyle. The hedonistic-consumerist characteristic is tied with the approach of 21st century mankind to religion. His religiosity is equally consumerist moreover in the sense of expressive individualism linked with an unbound and completely free approach to religion. Concisely put in the

7 Odprevaďte Paľa Demitru do hokejového neba. <http://www.pluska.sk/sport/ostatne/odprevadte-pala-demitru-do-hokejoveho-neba.html>, (26. 10. 2016).

8 *Pavol Demitra – pohreb /burial/ – posledná rozlúčka*. In <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VxKGFB4XOrI>, (26. 10. 2016).

words of sociologist K. Besecke: “Religions are about rules, spirituality is not”.⁹

Currently, sport can seem to be an effective means of forming multicultural awareness. Firstly, it removes the barriers between the secular and the religious, as was already mentioned above. Secondly, it can concern the removal of prejudices when searching for universal human dignity. In many cases, multi-religious clashes are mainly about Islam and its manifestations in sport. This indicates that sport, with regards to its global popularity, can be a very powerful means of spreading religious ideas and forming religious awareness. Religion is also a sociological category, it is not an autonomous social solitaire, but forms all areas of the respective culture. That is why sport can be a place of creating another culture in a given culture. Alternatively, sport can present a conflict between culture and religion; as in the case of legalizing headscarves (hijabs) in sports competitions. It being understood that this does not address just the Muslim scarf itself, but the legitimizing of multicultural and multi-religious awareness in society.¹⁰ A similar religious-cultural subtext was in the French perception of the dispute over wearing ‘burkinis’ – Muslim swimwear, covering the entire body.¹¹

Similarly, many boxers wear T-shirts with the effigy of a saintly person, or short and concise religiously motivated slogans. Often when entering the ring they play a religious song, such as Tyson Fury in the memorable match against V. Klitschko.¹²

Football as the religion of the masses

The peculiarity of our time is that the commercial and hedonistic-secular aspect becomes a universal sign and promoter of amorphous spirituality. It is also significant in sport. An important place belongs to the sport par excellence – football. The fact that it takes place in a stadium with high-capacity audiences presents a kind of modern-day temple that is full. It is also a sport that has several popular leagues in Europe: The Premier

9 Besecke, K. You can´t put God in the Box. Thoughtful Spirituality in a Rational Age. s. 63.

10 Fatima Fakier. *Muslim women in sport: culture vs religion*. <http://www.aquila-style.com/focus-points/mightymuslimah/muslim-women-in-sport/34572/>, (26. 10. 2016)

11 *Cannes zakázalo burkiny – muslimské plavky zahalující celé tělo*. http://zpravy.idnes.cz/cannes-burkini-muslimske-plavky-zakaz-dh7-/zahranicni.aspx?c=A160812_112230_zahranicni_aha, (26. 10. 2016).

12 Тайсон Фьюри любит Иисуса Tyson Fury love Jesus https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=76iyxx2_brs, (26. 10. 2016).

League, La Liga, The Champions League, The World Cup, held under the auspices of the English and the Spanish Football Federation, the UFA and FIFA. Simply buying the broadcasting rights is a matter of prestige for any media company. Media coverage of football competitions is an original way to help spread the pseudo-religion of football.

An example is the well-known Slovak presenter Marcel Merčiak, who often gets hooked on football-spiritual syncretism during his commentaries. Incidentally, for post-modern religiosity it is not just religious syncretism that is characteristic, but the merging of disparate fields such as religion and health, religion and school education as well as religion and sport. To give an example here are the words that this sports commentator uttered after the victory over Poland in 2010, by which the Slovak national team clinched a place in the World Cup: “*Blessed are those who believe in the religion of football. Blessed are those who at this moment believe that it's true. See you in South Africa! Our time has come! ...*”¹³ “If the concept of beatitude has an eschatological anchor in the biblical context, then in the statements of a commentator it is clearly moving to the level of immanence. However, what remains unchanged is a concept that, thanks to profanation, is well understood by the football audience. Similarly, the commentator has equated the goal area with a shrine, or even assigned three world-class players to the ‘Holy Trinity of Football’. They were L. Messi, H. Xavi and A. Iniesta.

However, the football turfs have witnessed original and peculiar rituals and customs that are also typical for individual players. Examples include prayers, crossing themselves before entering the stadium, raising a finger to the sky after scoring or wearing rosaries. There are also African dances, a facet that many Europeans find comical. While dancing, especially for African players, is an expression of gratitude to the deities of their homeland¹⁴. The variety of these rituals may reflect the Christian, Jewish, Muslim or pagan spiritual provenance from which the players came to the clubs. They bring with them their religious background as well as the pertinent religious belief.

It is for this reason that football has been nominated as the most influential religion/spirituality in the world. More specifically, from the standpoint of religious studies reflecting on post-modern religiosity, it can be included among pseudo-religious cults. The cult of football contains all the elements that satisfy the typological label. The participating audience

13 *Niňajov svet. Najutipnejšie výroky športových komentátorov.* <http://sport.sme.sk/ninajovsvet/vyrok/1303>, (26. 10. 2016).

14 *Futbal a náboženství: Zvyky, rituály, modlitby.* <http://sport.aktuality.sk/c/46981/futbal-a-nabozenstvo-zvyky-ritualy-modlitby/>, (26. 10. 2016)

is numerous both physically and virtually. The cult actors are the players who present their religious beliefs, but more often an amorphous – unanchored spirituality. This is reflected in gesturing, a posture or even ritual dances performed on the side-line after scoring the winning goal. Commentators or sports journalists make up a significant background. They often use religious terms, mainly in the headlines of printed or online articles.

Conclusion

The mixing of sport and religiosity is a striking feature of the media world. Printed, visual and auditory media are an effective transfer of pseudo-religiosity, which finds its auditorium at sports stadiums or simply in the living room. Essentially one does not have to take a single step to get one's torso of spirituality, which, moreover, is not binding, but modifies the spiritual world. It is therefore possible to consider sport as a kind of missionary means, marked by the game, entertainment and hedonism. Moreover, this missionary transfer is extremely popular and attractive, and requires nothing from the participant. Because the game is consumption, entertainment, where religiosity is merely a kind of added value. Sport as a game for adults is firstly a means of abstracting religious concepts from a traditional religious environment. But at the same time it concerns an effective means to maintain religiosity in man, religious awareness albeit unconventionally embedded mainly only in the earthly plane. Alternatively, on the transcendental plane it is significantly modified by the earthly characteristics and needs of contemporary man.

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Pavol Demitra – pohreb /burial/ – posledná rozlúčka. In <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VxKGFB4XOrI>, (26.10.2016)

doc. PhDr. Eva Orbanová, PhD., works at the Department of Ethics and Moral Philosophy at Trnava University. She has addressed the issue of post-modern religiosity and the New Age movement for many years. These topics were the main subject of her dissertation (Religious Syncretism in the New Age Movement) and post-doctoral work (Religion and Ethics. Cult and Value).

