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Sports and the American Sacred: What are the Limits of Civil Religion?

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Arts
Department of Religious Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

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Dedication

To Heather, for the support, insight, motivation, humor, and love you always give me. As with everything we do, on this project I am proud to say that you have been with me every step of the way. Thank you for seeing why I do care if ever I get back.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines whether American civil religion, in its enactment in daily American life, is cosmological. That is, it questions whether the sacred behind American civil religion is present in the physical-material realm and not in a transcendental principle or being. It is interested in why, seemingly, what is sacred in American culture is always what is happening here and now. This is evidenced by and manifested in multiple vehicles of the sacred in American culture. These vehicles include a range of institutions from economics to politics to religion to education. They also include entities such as the mass media, the arts, and various elements of popular culture, of which one of (if not the very most) prominent, large-scale, and widely accepted forms are sports. As such, this paper maintains that sports, as a vehicle for the sacred in American culture, reveal a cosmological dimension of American civil religion. The thesis' primary investigation seeks comprehension of what is sacred in America and how the culture mediates it.

Chapter One

Introduction

In seeking to understand the limits of American civil religion, this paper explores whether civil religion has a cosmological orientation in how it functions in contemporary culture. To approach this issue, the thesis examines the extent to which popular sports, acting as a conduit of the sacred sense of American identity, illuminate civil religion's cosmological patterns. This study holds that the phenomenon of American civil religion is the most appropriate context in which to understand the sacred national identity. Moreover, this paper is interested in how the civil religious sacred national identity is carried to individuals and the culture as a whole. It finds that this occurs through a variety of vehicles, ranging from abstract economic principles to the concretely visual images of television and films. The brand of civil religion that at one level vitalizes and at another level depends on these vehicles has a cosmological character more oriented toward the immediate concerns of material world and less focused on transcendent ideals. The thesis further maintains that, of the various civil religion vehicles, sports is possibly the most frequently encountered widely accepted, particularly in terms of shaping individuals' self-understanding and perceptions of the country and world. The contribution this thesis seeks to present is a conceptualization of civil religion that observes its various carriers at work in contemporary American culture with a specific analysis on sports as a particularly prominent carrier.

Brief History of the Problem and Thesis Statement

Since the appearance Robert N. Bellah's¹ description of American Civil religion, many theorists have sought and struggled to apply the concept to the everyday experience of American life. As the civil religion thesis has developed, the scope of its focus has typically analyzed the quasi-Judeo-Christian religious themes present in American history. As such others, who have sought to understand how cultural institutions such as literature, art, or sports fit within the context of civil religion, have had to abandon the concept in favor of something more expansive. Representative theorists of these more broadly minded approaches are Catherine Albanese² and James A. Mathisen.³ For those adhering to Albanese's analysis, civil religion is a component of the larger category of cultural religion, while for those in agreement with Mathisen, civil religion is a form of folk religion. These attempts are helpful in how they move past Bellah's notion of a strictly transcendental, monotheistic sacred at work in American culture.

Yet, apart from the notion that cultural entities manifest what American culture finds important, they demure in describing what kind of religion is behind American culture and how religion and culture interact to negotiate what is sacred in America. To some extent, most studies of civil religion explicitly use Bellah's description as a starting point and often have difficulty navigating around the Judeo-Christian characterizations. As a result, studies like Mathisen's and Albanese's depart from civil religion altogether in favor of a new, though seemingly related, category of religion that retains the non-institutional characteristics of civil religion, but discards its theistic leanings. Based on

¹ Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96 (Winter 1967), 1-21.

² Catherine L. Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1981).

³ James A. Mathisen, "From Civil Religion to Folk Religion: The Case of American Sport," *Sport and Religion* ed. Shirl J. Hoffman (Champaign, Ill.: Human Kinetics, 1992), 16-33.

the multiple strands of thought on civil religion that includes Bellah, Albanese, Mathisen, and a variety of others, one wonders whether the case for civil religion becomes more plausible if examined in the context of non-transcendental, cosmological religion through a specific examination of one or multiple cultural products.

To address this issue, this paper holds that sports convey the American sense of sacred in a manner that suggests a cosmological dimension of American civil religion absent from the literature, including the examples from Albanese and Mathisen. The thesis this paper advances is that American civil religion, in daily American life, is cosmological. That is, the sacred behind American civil religion is present in the physical-material realm and not in a transcendental principle or being. What is sacred in American culture is always what is happening here and now. This is evidenced by and manifested in multiple vehicles of the sacred in American culture. These vehicles include a range of institutions from economics to politics to religion to education. They also include entities such as the mass media, the arts, and various elements of popular culture, of which one of (if not the very most) prominent, large-scale, and widely accepted forms are sports. This paper maintains that sports, as a vehicle for the sacred in American culture, reveal a cosmological dimension of American civil religion.

The thesis focuses on what is sacred in America and how the culture mediates it. Its foundational line of reasoning is that if sports serve any religious function, they do so, not as religions themselves, but under the broader category of cultural religion. Unlike some analyses, however, this thesis argues that American civil religion, when explored beyond Bellah's parameters, serves as America's cultural religion in a cosmological manner and sports manifest this. In exploring the boundaries of civil religion, this paper

has a fundamental problem with studies that adhere to Bellah's terms, as these artificially confine civil religion to a denuded form of Protestantism and ignore the expansive function and mediation of the sacred in American culture. This paper also finds shortcomings in inquiries such as Albanese's and Mathisen's that artificially separate cultural religion from civil religion and make the two mutually exclusive. Rather than examining civil religion in the context of the Judeo-Christian tradition, this inquiry explores it in the context of the cosmological synthesis of religion, society, and culture. It has an interest in how the sacred, as the unsurpassable, ultimately significant core of the culture, influences contemporary Americans' perceptions of the world and their actions in it.

In short, this paper holds that Bellah's understanding of civil religion as a shared expression of American national identity is essentially accurate, particularly in that its specific context is American culture. It also finds that understandings such as those of Mathisen, Albanese, and others who look beyond the confines of biblical religion contribute to a more expansive understanding of the concept. Still, whereas Bellah tends to be overly exclusive, those like Mathisen and Albanese tend to be overly inclusive, to the point that the specificity of the American contextualization is lost. This study will suggest that sports, in conveying a sacred sense of American national identity, function in the context of Bellah's understanding of civil religion but in somewhat different terms. Foundationally, it is neither a wholesale rejection of Bellah's thesis nor a commitment to it.

To engage its question, the thesis will be divided into four chapters. The remainder of the first will examine literature relevant to the topic, with a specific focus on

texts addressing sports in the context of civil religion. Chapter two will present theory germane to understanding myth, ritual, religion, and culture and how these categories apply to sports as an expression of civil religion. The third will explore data that vivify how sports amplify the meta-myth of American culture in a civil religious context. Chapter four will conclude the analysis with an assessment of what the preceding indicates about American civil religion and the contribution the study of sports, religion, and popular culture offers to the civil religion thesis and religious studies as a whole.⁴

Literature Review

The notion of civil religion dates to the 18th century and Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Social Contract*.⁵ However, the concept as it is contemporarily understood in the context of the humanities and social sciences results from Bellah's 1967 article "Civil Religion in America." Here, Bellah describes, "The civil religion at its best is a genuine apprehension of universal and transcendent religious reality as seen in or, one could

⁴ At this point, it bears noting that by "popular sports" this paper means those that are either frequently encountered or widely accepted. The sports in question here will be confined to those most properly considered elements of American popular culture. For purposes of this analysis and in subscription to Jack Nachbar and Kevin Lause's "Popular Culture Formula," which holds that elements of popular culture reflect the audience's beliefs and values, the sports in question are those specific to contemporary American culture. In particular, this paper is interested in the major professional sports of baseball, football, stock-car racing, basketball, and hockey as well the "big time" college athletics of NCAA Division-I competition. This understanding follows from the consideration that popular culture consists of that which is either frequently encountered or widely accepted, often referred to as the "visibility-acceptance" formula. This distinguishes the sports examined in this study from those culturally localized in some manner and less pertinent to illuminating how broad swathes of contemporary Americans understand the world and their place in it. Not surprisingly, as the most popular sports in America, those that this thesis considers are the ones that most visibly embody elements of civil religion. At many of these sports' contests, it is not uncommon to witness multiple U.S. flag displays, military ceremonies, and the playing of "The Star-Spangled Banner" and/or "God Bless America." In like fashion, the idea that popular culture reflects its audience's beliefs and values in conjunction with the visibility-acceptance formulae help account for why sports such as soccer, lacrosse, and rowing (though all commanding a significant following in the U.S.), enjoy only marginal popularity in the culture as a whole. Cf. Jack Nachbar and Kevin Lause, "An Introduction to the Study of Popular Culture: What is this Stuff that Dreams are made Of?" *Popular Culture: An Introductory Text*, ed. Jack Nachbar and Kevin Lause (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling State University Popular Press, 1992), 16-17.

⁵ Jean Jacques Rousseau. *The Social Contract* trans. Willmoore Kendall (Chicago: Regnery Gateway, 1982 [1954]).

almost say, as revealed through the experience of the American people.”⁶ Moreover, according to Bellah, “Behind the civil religion at every point lie Biblical archetypes: Exodus, Chosen People, Promised Land, New Jerusalem, Sacrificial Death and Rebirth,”⁷ in language that closely parallels the Judeo-Christian tradition. Yet, despite such a close parallel, Bellah maintains that American civil religion is fundamentally distinct from Christianity in a way that is neither a generic form of the religion nor a product of the Deist leanings of the founding fathers. Rather, Bellah’s central theme is that American civil religion represents a unique and qualitatively real category of religious experience. Still, though Bellah emphasizes that American civil religion “is clearly not itself Christianity” nor a product of Deist natural-law ideology but rather a nation seeped in the language and narrative ethics of ancient Israel,⁸ he does not point out that such themes are quite harmonious Puritanical Calvinism. His primary interest is in how American civil religion functions as a salvational, transcendental, monotheistic religion.

Were there time and space to do so, this paper could investigate a thorough review of civil religion literature and examine the “life course” of the concept, which has entailed a wide range of theorizing about civil religion and its utility in comprehending the function of American culture.⁹ However, for immediate purposes, this paper will

⁶ Bellah, 12.

⁷ Ibid., 18.

⁸ Ibid., 7.

⁹ See for example: Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (New York: Seabury, 1975); Bellah, “Civil Religion and the American Future,” *Religious Education* (May-June 1976); Bellah, et al. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Phillip E. Hammond, “Religion and the ‘Informing’ of Culture,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 3 (Fall 1963); Hammond, “Commentary on *Civil Religion in America*,” *The Religious Situation: 1968*, ed. Donald R. Cutler (Boston: Beacon, 1968); John A. Coleman, “Civil Religion,” *Sociological Analysis* 31 (1970); Cornish Rogers, “Sports, Religion and Politics: The Renewal of an Alliance,” *The Christian Century* (April 5, 1972); Robert D. Linder, “Civil Religion in Historical Perspective: The Reality that Underlies the Concept,” *Journal of Church and State* 20 (1975); Michael Novak, “America as Religion,” *Religious Education* (May-June 1976); John Helgeland, “Civil Religion, Military Religion: Roman and American,” *Foundations and Facets Forum* 5/1 (March 1989); Mathisen,

focus specifically on those treatments of civil religion that indicate the breadth of its scope as reaching beyond Bellah's initial confines, with a particular interest in those exploring the relationship between sports and civil religion.

As an approach to civil religion and to develop her related concept of cultural religion, Albanese deals with the civil religion thesis and expands upon its foundations. She notes that it blends themes regarding the history of Israel with those of Rome, particularly the idea that "the empire was linked by a common ideal for living – the Roman Way of Life – and by a ritual centered around the emperor."¹⁰ In this regard, she explains that due in large part to the public school system, a cultus of George Washington has emerged during American history that makes him a new Moses, a new Joshua, and also a new Cincinnatus. Strikingly, Albanese notes some of the place-bound significance of civil religion in describing, "Sacred space includes shrines and holy places like George Washington's home in Mt. Vernon, Virginia, and Independence Hall in Philadelphia,"¹¹ or even conceivably, Gettysburg and Iwo Jima.

Albanese's primary interest is in how civil religion functions in the broader context of cultural religion, which she describes as "the means by which people order their lives and search for meaning within the everyday world."¹² She further describes that cultural religion consists of the various "ways that people reach moments of

"Twenty Years after Bellah: Whatever Happened to American Civil Religion?" *Sociological Analysis* 50 (Summer 1989); Stanley Grenz, "Secular Saints: Civil Religion in America" 33 (Ja 1990); Rhys H. Williams and Susan M. Alexander, "Religious Rhetoric in American Populism: Civil Religion as Movement Ideology," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 33.1 (1994); Michael Angrosino, "Civil Religion Redux," *Anthropological Quarterly* 75.2 (2002). This scope of thought indicates the difficulty and wide interpretation with which the civil religion theory has been applied.

¹⁰ Albanese, 284.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 296.

¹² *Ibid.*, 312.

transcendence, using ordinary culture as a window into an ‘other’ world.”¹³ To illuminate these “means” and “ways,” Albanese explores the bases of cultural religion, explaining that in the outward manifestations of cultural religion, “sports, technology, and popular psychology all provide behavioral codes for many Americans.”¹⁴ That is, in her understanding, Americans learn how to be American from such cultural institutions. These institutions, in turn, supply Americans an avenue in which to experience a supra-mundane self-transformation. Though she does not explicitly explain as much, it appears that Albanese understands the American sacred in the context of this self-transformation’s transcending ordinary existence.

Elsewhere, Albanese treats sports as religiously and culturally significant. In the context of America, she considers, “Without waiting for a messianic stranger people assume the protagonist’s role themselves. Therefore, the sports code can foster success in business, industry, or government.”¹⁵ For Albanese, the ritualistic nature of sports, with its focus on physical and mental control and its capacity to reinforce cultural ideals, offers a kind of salvation in which the individual thrusts her- or himself into the hero’s role. In Albanese’s analysis, cultural religion is the unifying thread of an otherwise pluralistic setting. Thus, institutions such as sports, politics, and economics often intermingle and typically infuse individuals with a sense of American identity. Such cultural institutions highlight “the role of the one religion in America,” which acts “to create a religious nation to blur the social and ideological boundaries between separate

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 321.

¹⁵ Albanese, “Dominant and Public Center: Reflections on the ‘One’ Religion of the United States” *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 4/3 (September 1983), 94.

groups who constitute the many.”¹⁶ In this analysis, American cultural religion, though broad and multifarious, binds people together in away that seeks to mitigate differences and cope with pluralism. Sports, for Albanese, act as a fairly effective and visible agency on behalf of this cause. What Albanese neglects, though, is the extent to which sports mediate what American culture holds sacred and whether this imparts an understanding of civil religion beyond Bellah’s terms.

Of the many texts that analyze sports as religion, one of the earliest is Novak’s *The Joy of Sports* (1976). In this work, Novak tangentially approaches the civil religion thesis. Though he notes that “sports are an almost universal language binding our diverse nation, especially its men, together,”¹⁷ Novak does not establish a definition of religion, civil or otherwise, and resultantly neglects to pursue this consideration further. Instead, Novak’s primary interest is in locating sports within the spectrum of American culture. To this end, he finds that sports function as religion insofar as they establish a kind of community of followers. He also maintains sports reflect the fabric of American cultural myths. Novak’s analysis moves away from civil religion and focuses on how sports’ popularity levels reflect trends in the culture as a whole. By *Joy*’s conclusion, Novak has done little to unpack how sports function in a civil religious context other than in conjunction with regional and national values. As such, he avoids the question of how sports represent the American sacred and is vague on the extent to which they are religious.

In an article appearing in the Shirl J. Hoffman-edited *Sport and Religion*, “The Super Bowl as Religious Festival” Joseph L. Price maintains that as a holiday festival, the

¹⁶ Ibid., 95.

Super Bowl, in Durkheimian fashion, is American culture on its grandest stage. Price explains, “the event signals a convergence of sport, politics, and myth,” replete with “culture heroes” such as Bob Hope, John Denver, Dan Rather, and Ronald Reagan; enormous flags; and “Air Force Flight tactics.”¹⁸ He asserts that sports function primarily to celebrate American culture. In so doing, he implicitly crosses paths with the civil religion and cultural religion theses.

Both of these ideas receive more sustained treatment in another entry in the volume, James A. Mathisen’s “From Civil Religion to Folk Religion: The Case of American Sport.” In distancing sports from civil religion, Mathisen confines considerations regarding civil religion to Bellah’s initial Judeo-Christian terms. According to Mathisen, sports are a feature of American folk religion. Mathisen derives his understanding from Gustav Mensching’s division of religion into two categories: folk and universal. According to Mensching, in folk religion, “The individual has not yet discovered himself but has a life quite bound up with that of the collectivity,” and “the universal religions are in principle supra-national and owe their diffusion and ability to diffuse to this supra-national character.”¹⁹ The folk-universal distinction appears, to some extent, to mirror the cosmological-transcendental spectrum, but Mensching does not explicate this nor does Mathisen indicate it. Rather, Mathisen’s main point is that sports reinforce cultural values and ideas. As such, they operate as an extension of culture that

¹⁷Michael Novak, *The Joy of Sports: End Zones, Bases, Baskets Balls and the Consecration of the American Spirit* (New York: Basic, 1976), 3.

¹⁸ Joseph L. Price, “The Super Bowl as Religious Festival,” in *Sport and Religion*, 14. Price’s initial article followed the 1984 Super Bowl. Illustrative in terms of how “heroes” are regarded in popular culture, it could be argued that none of these is even still culturally relevant today despite their prominent status 20 years ago.

¹⁹ Gustav Mensching, “Folk and Universal Religion,” *Religion, Culture, and Society: A Reader in the Sociology of Religion* ed. Louis Schneider (New York: Wiley, 1964), 254-255.

ritually and culticly reinforces “the efficacy of its shared myths and beliefs.”²⁰

Ultimately, in Mathisen’s view, whatever sacred appears in sports in some way reinforces that of American culture as a whole but they are not a part of civil religion. Instead, sports legitimate, support, and, in the final analysis, surpass the function of civil religion in American society.

One text that purports to offer a sustained analysis of sports and civil religion is Christopher H. Evans and William R. Herzog-edited volume, *The Faith of Fifty Million: Baseball, Religion, and American Culture*. The text’s first two chapters, authored by Evans, attempt to place baseball in the context of civil religion by examining its relationship with American theology. As such, Evans writes of “baseball as a uniquely transcendent phenomenon – yet a phenomenon that was grounded in the ethos of America itself.”²¹ Essentially in this take, the American ethos is that of Biblical Christianity. Theoretically, *Faith* is underwhelming and does not develop an involved treatment of what baseball as civil religion means in terms of Bellah’s original comments or anyone else’s expansion thereof. Instead, it concludes with Evans and Herzog affirming that baseball falls under the heading of civil religion because it “is a transcendent symbol that reminds those who tarry in the present that the future will somehow be better than the past.”²² In doing so, the editors indirectly affirm Bellah’s linking civil religion with the Judeo-Christian notion of ultimacy and time but ultimately fail to further develop the concept meaningfully.

²⁰ Mathisen, 23.

²¹ Christopher H. Evans and William R. Herzog, eds. *The Faith of Fifty Million: Baseball, Religion, and American Culture* (Louisville: WJK, 2002), 27.

²² *Ibid.*, 252.

In his take on civil religion, Cornish Rogers suggests a fundamental linkage of sports, religion, and politics in American culture. He goes on to indicate that, as a meaning-giving institution, sports hold an enormous portion of the collective plausibility structure in their nationalistic and culture-wide character. He notes that football games typically will have patriotic ceremonies, particularly in more important contests. He also notes that the games, at the time he is writing, “are usually opened with prayer,” but “it doesn’t seem to matter whether the invoker is Protestant, Catholic, or Jew,”²³ thanks to the decentralized, non-denominational nature of civil religion. Ultimately, he declares, “Sports are rapidly becoming the dominant ritualistic expression of the reification of established religion in America.”²⁴ In other words, sports exist as the principle realm, institution, and medium of civil religion.

An article much in line with these types of studies, but perhaps less explicit in analyzing civil religion is William J. Morgan’s “Baseball and the Search for an American Moral Identity.” According to Morgan, baseball embodies a cultural paradox in that the sport’s ideals represent a part of America’s myth of success while its notable scandals represent its more nefarious place in the American marketplace landscape. However, baseball has functioned as an ethical mediator and, according to Morgan, “Baseball thus gave America a highly visible moral standard by which to measure itself.”²⁵ Morgan is particularly interested in how baseball communicates morality and defines identities in contemporary culture. Of this, he writes, “Baseball’s wide appeal to Americans near and

²³ Cornish Rogers, “Sports, Religion and Politics: The Renewal of an Alliance,” *The Christian Century* (April 5, 1972), 394.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ William J. Morgan, “Baseball and the Search for an American Moral Identity,” *Baseball and Philosophy: Thinking Outside the Batter’s Box* ed. Eric Bronson (Chicago and LaSalle: Open Court, 2004), 157.

far is to be understood as a moral appeal, as an important question, ‘Who are we?’²⁶ As such, when figures such as Joe Jackson or Sammy Sosa are implicated in gambling or bat-corking scandals, for Morgan, “It’s in moments like these . . . that the idea of America as a moral beacon is most luminous.”²⁷ To whatever extent this is true, such moments reveal the institution’s cultural significance, meaning-defining agency, and its ethical narrative potentials. Yet, despite ostensible parallels, Morgan does not incorporate the civil religion idea.

In the context of the preceding literature examples, sports usually appear in efforts to make sense of civil religion’s applicability to expressions of American culture. In these types of approaches, little theoretical attention is given to how sports or other entities act as vehicles for civil religion or the sense of sacredness it embodies. Instead, the focus is on making civil religion a less abstract concept and one that applies to the realities of American life. This reflects a general formlessness in the corpus of theory regarding civil religion, particularly in light of Bellah’s disquietude with the concept in the 1970s and 1980s. However, a slight reassessment of theory applicable to civil religion might orient the concept and account for the position of institutions such as sports within it.

²⁶ Ibid., 167.

²⁷ Ibid., 168.

Chapter Two

Theory: Understandings of Religion, Culture, Myth, and Ritual

The aforementioned sources reveal that sports are not alien to the concept of American civil religion. This indicates that sports, to some extent, serve as a mode of the American civil religious consciousness. However, the notion of sports as an extension of civil religion, like all conceptualizations, is essentially formless without some understanding and defining of the range of religion and, in this context, secularization. In this regard, the work of Paul Tillich, Eric Voegelin, Jacques Ellul, Peter Berger, Steve Bruce, Darrell J. Fasching, and the especially precise synthesis of their theories by Dell deChant are particularly relevant.

Tillich's description of religion lends itself to studies of civil religion in that it directs its attention, most centrally, to the elements of culture occupying the realm of religion. Without delving into a thorough analysis of Tillich or his hallmark *Theology of Culture*, for Tillich in *Theology of Culture*, "Religion, in the largest and most basic sense of the word, is ultimate concern."²⁸ This ultimate concern, for Tillich, resides at the base of culture and the two are, essentially, inseparable. In his words, "religion as ultimate concern is the meaning-giving substance of culture, and culture is the totality of forms in which the basic concern of religion expresses itself."²⁹ From here, he advances that contemporary culture features a humanity seeking to reverse its industrial separation from transcendent, eternal reality, as evidenced in various artistic and creative expressions. For Tillich, this alienation, at times, activates the theological protest of contemporary

²⁸ Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 7-8.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

culture's occlusion of reality. Important to this study, Tillich's thoughts indicate that contemporary humanity seeks sacred meaning in various cultural forms. However, Tillich's critique that "Man has ceased to encounter reality as meaningful,"³⁰ neglects to consider that ultimate reality and meaning in contemporary culture might exist firmly within the confines of the "closed door" of "the present world."³¹ Instead, despite recognizing the ubiquitous current of religion rushing through the moorings of culture everywhere, Tillich's interest is in critiquing culture from the standpoint of existential Protestantism.

In the *Sacred Santa: Religious Dimensions of Consumer Culture*, Dell deChant's description of religion relies heavily on Tillich's but clarifies and expands it for theoretical deployment. According to deChant, "Religion is about power" and mediates it with a belief in an ultimate power, within a community, through myths and rituals, and "a certain degree of power over material conditions."³² In a similar manner, Albanese has also formulized a "working definition" of religion aimed at categorizing the varieties of culture's religious components. According to Albanese, "Religion here can be understood as a system of symbols (creed, code, cultus) by means of which a people (a community) orient themselves in the world with reference to both ordinary and extraordinary meanings and values."³³ Like deChant and Tillich, Albanese notes the indelibly collective nature of religion as well as its role in framing reality.

Though fairly exacting, none of these descriptions excludes the possibility of considering religious cultural phenomena other than traditional religions. Hence, with a

³⁰Ibid., 46.

³¹ Ibid., 47.

³² Dell deChant, *The Sacred Santa: Religious Dimensions of Consumer Culture* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2002), 9-10.

fair level of plausibility, one can establish a religious function of sports. Yet, the supposition is further developed within the context of the secularization thesis as posited by Berger and applied by Bruce. Without treating the entirety of Berger or comprehensively analyzing the details of his theory, one can find his definition of secularization particularly illustrative in understanding the religiosity of ostensibly non-religious experiences. For Berger, “By secularization we mean the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols.”³⁴ Centrally, according to Berger, this process takes place on both cultural and individual levels, meaning not only that no longer is Christendom a Western reality, but also one’s mode of thinking is not religiously dominated. Of the many consequences of this trend, “pluralism” is especially illustrative. As Berger explains, “The man in the street is confronted with a wide variety of religious and other reality-defining agencies that compete for his allegiance or at least attention, and none of which is in a position to coerce him into allegiance.”³⁵ Moreover, for Berger, this results in a fragmentation of the cultural base, or plausibility structure, in which whereas once the socially defined world was entirely upheld by religion, contemporarily numerous “reality-defining agencies” occupy the base.

Berger, for his part, later finds significance in the role sports play in the secular world’s fragmented plausibility structure. Primarily, he reasons that, following and citing Johan Huizinga,³⁶ sports provide an emotional/psychological experience of the sacred by providing an avenue of joyful expression amid an otherwise rationalistic secularized

³³ Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion*, 9. (Parentheses in original)

³⁴ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor, 1967), 107.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 127.

existence. Of this, he writes, “Joy is play’s intention” and “under the aspect of inductive faith, religion is the final vindication of childhood and of joy and of all gestures that replicate these.”³⁷ Though he is writing in a much different context, Berger’s consideration supports the notion that sports can function as primary vehicle of the sacred.

Using Berger as a starting ground, Steve Bruce further develops the concept of pluralism in his exploration of the concomitant socio-cultural forces of secularization and modernization. For him, Berger’s notion of “pluralism” is a “fragmentation,” which “is the division of single social institutions into smaller but more specialized units.”³⁸ He further explains that where religion is most culturally significant in the modern world is in its role in national, ethnic, and social identification.³⁹ Though this would seem to lend credence to an understanding of sports as religion, Bruce warns that identifying implicit religion invariably ends in futility. He writes, “Examining the parallels between football and religion can be interesting and illuminating but it is not helped at all by defining football as a religion. To do so is to establish by definitional fiat what should be demonstrated factually.”⁴⁰ This would also seem to preclude studies of politics, technology, and economics as religion and one wonders whether, in Bruce’s eyes, it is “helped at all” to understand the sacred of al-Qaeda, the Nazis, or American consumers. Still, this caveat notwithstanding, Bruce’s expansion on Berger’s analysis of secular

³⁶ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon, 1950).

³⁷ Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (New York: Anchor, 1990 [1969]), 67-68.

³⁸ Steve Bruce, *Religion in the Modern World: From Cathedrals to Cults* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 39.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 96-125.

⁴⁰ Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2002), 201.

pluralism or fragmentation leaves open the possibility that something or a group of things could hold space previously occupied by religion and achieve similar ends.

Here, Voegelin's remarks on cosmological and transcendental religion and their manifestations in the modern world prove useful. Put briefly, deriving a theme from the work of Karl Jaspers, Voegelin considers that as cosmological systems, "all the early empires, Near Eastern as well as Far Eastern, understood themselves as representatives of transcendent order, of the order of the cosmos; and some of them even understood this order as a 'truth.'"⁴¹ In a manner that resembles and seems to anticipate Mircea Eliade's entire career, Voegelin further explains that in these systems, "the empire is a cosmic analogue and, a little world reflecting the order of the great, comprehensive world" as "the great ceremonies of the empire represent the rhythm of the cosmos; festivals and sacrifices are a cosmic liturgy, a symbolic participation of the cosmos in the cosmos."⁴²

All of this hints at the notion that time, ultimacy, and humanity are, to some extent eternally present within the realm of the natural world. However, according to Voegelin, following the "axis time," which he dates from 800 to 300 BCE, emerges "the concepts of a closed and an open society for the purpose of characterizing the two social states in the development of mankind which are created by this epoch."⁴³ These two divisions mirror the rift between the transcendent, supernatural existence of the ultimate power and the mundane, natural life of humanity. For Voegelin, the cultural processes of the axis period culminate in Christianity's rise to power in the Roman Empire. At this point, "de-divinization," or "the historical process in which the culture of polytheism died

⁴¹ Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 54. Voegelin cites Karl Jaspers, *Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (Zurich, 1949), 18ff.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 60-61.

. . . and human existence in society became reordered through the experience of man's destination,"⁴⁴ obviated the pantheons and stripped culture of its cosmological vestiges. However, with the emergence of modernity, Voegelin finds a process of "re-divinization" that has its taproots in the ancient Gnostic heresies, survives through Calvinistic modifications, and achieves high plausibility in modern social-political movements.⁴⁵

In a manner that nicely supplements these thoughts as well as the entirety of Voegelin's re-comsmicization thesis, Ellul suggests that the nature of political culture runs counter to the supposed secularization and desacralization of the post-Christian world. He maintains that where once the sacred resided in nature it now emerges in various supporting institutions of the political state, particularly technology and, to a lesser extent, economics. Here, the important consideration is that the modern sacred, for Ellul, functions within in the physical, material realm and is apprehended by those with economic prowess, technological proficiency, and ultimately political power. Also relevant is Ellul's notion that whatever is "sacred must be incarnate."⁴⁶ As he explains, "the person in question is the one in the group who concentrates in himself all the 'virtues' implied by the sacred," as his example instructs all others "how they should act, how they should appear, and how they should behave toward the sacred."⁴⁷ For Ellul, accounting for figures such as Stalin, Hitler, Mao, and the power they command comes through explaining the sacred they harness and represent. Without directly mentioning it, Ellul indicates that the modern sacred and the individuals who possess it mirror the shaman of primal culture who held the highest level of sacred mana power among

⁴⁴ Ibid., 107.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 136ff.

⁴⁶ Jacques Ellul, *The New Demons*, trans. C. Edward Hopkin (New York: Seabury, 1975), 56.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

humans. Implicitly this points to contemporary culture's cosmological underpinnings, which manifest themselves in hero figures (Stalin, Hitler, Mao) and through cultural institutions (economics, technology, politics) so successfully and seamlessly as to be part of the taken-for-granted order of life. With only a small jump, one can use Ellul's categories to interpret the hero-ization of former NFL star Pat Tillman, who died in 2004 military operations in Afghanistan following his post-9/11 enlistment. In so doing, one also gets a sense of the cosmological aspects of sports, American culture, and the interaction between the two.

Also illustrative is Ellul's three-part division of myths. Put simply, for Ellul, in the modern world the dominant narratives are the fundamental or basic myths of science and history, that "are the bases for all the beliefs, ideologies, actions and feelings of twentieth-century man."⁴⁸ The basic myth is a kind of uber-myth that orients all other myths in reference to the sacred. Aside from the two fundamental myths, Ellul explains that "tertiary" myths, such as "the myth of the bourgeois, those of justice and peace, that of the actor or star, of the hero, those of oil and of productivity"⁴⁹ enliven the basic myths by bringing them into everyday existence. Despite myth's sacred function, Ellul cautions, "It is one of the expressions of the sacred" and "without a sacred there can be no myth."⁵⁰ This caveat is consistent with Ellul's understanding that the sacred is actively embodied in cultural institutions such as technology, politics, and religion.

Two studies that successfully deploy a synthesis Voegelin and Ellul and vivify a more encompassing usage the transcendental-cosmological categorization are deChant's *Sacred Santa* and Fasching's *The Ethical Challenge of Auschwitz and Hiroshima*:

⁴⁸ Ibid., 98.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 109.

Apocalypse or Utopia? One important consideration that deChant's text explicates is that " 'cosmological' refers to religions and cultural systems that locate the ground of being or ultimate concern in the natural world," and " 'transcendental' refers to religions and cultural systems that locate the ground of being in a supernatural dimension – literally, a realm beyond and radically different from nature."⁵¹ He applies an understanding of cosmological religion to postmodern consumerism but methodologically leaves open the possibility of a similar application to other inquiries of contemporary culture. For a variety of definitional and theoretical issues, deChant's investigation is an important addition to many studies in religion and contemporary culture. One idea *Santa* articulates especially usefully is the concept of the "meta-myth," derived from Ellul's conception of the basic myth. In deChant's explication, the meta-myth functions as the overarching, nomizing narrative fundamental to a culture system. At its core, the meta-myth reveals what is sacred, ultimate, and (in a Tillich-esque sense) religious in a culture. As Ellul details, meta- or basic myths provide "our image and our future," "what we want ourselves to be," and, importantly, "how we think of ourselves."⁵² As deChant explains in Eliadean fashion, the meta-myth drives other myths and incites ritual activity as "the basis for the entire mythico-ritual dynamic . . . that informs and guides the mythico-ritual experience."⁵³ Here, ritual is the acting out of myth and the two are mutually reinforcing.

In his analysis of consumer capitalism, deChant concludes that economics is the cosmological religion of contemporary culture. In a somewhat similar manner, Fasching deploys an understanding of modern technological societies that holds, "Human beings

⁵⁰ Ibid., 121.

⁵¹ deChant, 4.

⁵² Ellul, 109.

⁵³ DeChant, 10, 41.

realize themselves through a combination of realism about the limits imposed by their ecological condition as finite bodily creatures (the cosmos writ small) and the iconoclastic freedom of transcendence (the human writ large).”⁵⁴ Deriving considerations from the work of Ellul, Voegelin, Berger, and a host of others, Fasching maintains that an inborn tendency of many human societies is the classification of all things, including people, along sacred-profane dichotomizations. In such dichotomies, or sacred societies, “the other” typically falls into the profane category is often alienated and dehumanized. However, according to Fasching, in distinction from sacred societies, holy communities witness a dissolution of sacred-profane understandings of others in efforts to welcome the stranger. Quite roughly speaking, the cosmological-transcendental spectrum resembles the sacred society-holy community paradigm. However, for Fasching, these elements are actively present in the modern world and not a function of historical cultural processes. In other words, an understanding of cosmological religiosity yields an illumination of the contemporary world, particularly in terms of how the sacred appears in politics, technology, and the treatment of “others.” Plausibly, assessing other aspects of contemporary culture similarly reveals the function and identity of the culture.

Synthesis of Theory

Considering these strands of theory, the notion that sports serve as a vehicle of the sacred in American civil religion is illuminated by Albanese’s distinction between ordinary and extraordinary religion and her position that the two, in contemporary American culture, are difficult to separate. According to Albanese, “ordinary religion – the religion that is more or less synonymous with culture” tends to be implicit, whereas

⁵⁴ Darrell J. Fasching, *The Ethical Challenge of Auschwitz and Hiroshima: Apocalypse or Utopia?* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 151.

“extraordinary religion – the religion that helps people to transcend, or move beyond, their everyday culture and concerns . . . involves an encounter with some form of otherness.”⁵⁵ Much like Mensching’s folk-universal distinction (and Mathisen’s deployment thereof), Albanese’s two categories seemingly divide along cosmological-transcendental lines. However, in distinction from the folk-universal descriptions, Albanese’s categories are not mutually exclusive and the two can, at times, have complementary functions. Still, Albanese’s suggestion of two tiers operating toward alternate but similar goals indicates the pluralism/fragmentation endemic to modern secularization. Importantly, Albanese limits the scope of each to a function of cultural religion, indicating the variety of religious forms operating under an overarching religious system. Yet, without stretching the categories too far, it seems that institutions such as sports, politics, economics and the like reveal something of the ordinary religion while Bellah-esque themes regarding God and chosenness lean toward the extraordinary. Conceivably, both are components of civil religion, acting as the coin’s two sides in ways closely connected to the sacred sense of American identity. In other words, following Albanese’s categories, the limits of civil religion include the explicit and sometimes vocal themes of pseudo-Protestantism at home in a Bellah-conceptualized context. So too, on an implicit and on-going level various cultural products express and provide a means to experience the sacred in America.

In wrestling with theoretical and definitional considerations of civil religion’s boundaries, this paper holds that civil religion, in answering questions of ultimate concern, positing an understanding of an ultimate power, and binding the community together through myth and ritual, manifests several vehicles for experiencing the sacred

⁵⁵ Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion*, 6.

in the contemporary culture's pluralistic base. It also finds that culture, as the totality of human material and intellectual creations, has an inherent religious dimension. In contemporary America, this religious dimension is supplied by civil religion. In this regard, American civil religion, as expressed in its myths, rituals, and symbols, functions cosmologically in how it imparts the sacredness American identity. On the one hand it is totemic, with the flag, eagle, and myriad other symbols acting to orient and define the culture around a materially objectified representation of national identity. It is also polytheistic, with a long tradition of turning cultural heroes into immortalized deities, replete with monuments, namesake buildings, and images on currency.⁵⁶ It also tends to sacralize space, with locales such as Washington, D.C., Rushmore, and (especially in recent years) New York City holding an identity and cultural significance akin to Geza, Delphi, or Athens. Moreover, conceptions of time follow cyclical patterns, as evident in everything from holidays to school years to political calendars. In the secular/post-Christian/postmodern/fragmented plausibility structure of contemporary American culture, the sacred and its concomitant myths travel through a variety of narrative avenues, with sports being a particularly visible and large-scale carrier of the sacred.

⁵⁶ Parallel to this runs the tradition of attempting to immortalize and deify less-than-unanimously heroic figures.

Chapter Three

Data: How Sports Reveal the Sacred of American Civil Religion

The data this paper addresses are the day-to-day examples of sports carrying to Americans a brand of civil religion grounded in the here-and-now concerns of the material world. A synthesis of the above thinkers and theories supports, among other things, that sports, as an American cultural institution, serve as a meaning-giving agency that can shape individual and community identities, offer a systematic method for interpreting morality, and provide an avenue through which to experience sacredness. Yet, functions such as these witness sports operating in the context of the broader expression of American civil religion and the cultural sacred it imparts. Hypothetically, these functions of sports occur cosmologically, in a way that is nationally oriented with regional sublayers and in the framework of a cyclical concept of time in which the microcosm is an extension of the macrocosm. In other words, sports, as a vehicle for civil religion, follow and manifest the same themes and patterns of the latter; in contemporary American culture, the functions and phenomena of sports are intrinsically connected to the overarching American meta-myth in a way that implies a cosmological underpinning. The data examined in this section emerge in a several contexts. These include the taken-for-granted aspects of sports such as the playing of the national anthem or a U.S. flag present in the arena. The data also include the intermingling of sports and American identity in the context of popular culture, as exemplified by the Super Bowl phenomenon. Additionally, data also come from instances in which sports appear in a political context where, again, issues relative to national identity are at stake.

At a superficial level, the contextualization of sports in terms of the American sacred sense of identity is evident in pre-game ceremonies involving boy scouts, state troopers, or the ROTC. It is also visible on uniforms with U.S. flag patches, flag-inspired stadium regalia, and post-game fireworks spectacles. So too, a cursory scan of daily newspapers or a quick survey of any of the mass media reveals a sacred presence at work in a sports setting. For example, a collision of sacred values occurred when Major League Baseball sought to sell advertising space on its playing fields. The league, as part of a promotion for the blockbuster summer release, *Spider-Man 2*, planned to advertise the film over a three-day period in June on the bases and on-deck circles. This came as part of a developing tradition of placing advertising everywhere from baseball players' caps to the ice surface at hockey games to insignia on jockeys' riding silks. However, something about the sanctified nature of a ballpark prevented the ads from ever appearing, despite baseball's chief operating officer's plea, "Nothing's been done to affect the play of the game."⁵⁷ Public opinion, it seemed, was more in line with former MLB commissioner Fay Vincent's evaluation, "It's inevitable but awful."⁵⁸ For those strongly committed in the believing community, particularly vivid was baseball historian John Thornton's understanding that a baseball field is "a sort of magic circle to which rules accrue and adhere. And if you violate the terms, you run the risk of offending the gods."⁵⁹ In this case, the gods won the day and protected the sport from the profane advertising and the

⁵⁷ Thomas Heath and Greg Sandoval, "Purists Angered by Baseball's Swing to Ads," *Tampa Tribune* (May 6, 2004), 7. Interestingly, this story ran on the *Tribune's* front page, below a headline reading, "Bush Disavows Abuse" in response to the unfolding Abu Ghraib controversy.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Brian Steinberg and Stefan Fatsis, "With Webs on Bases, Baseball will Push 'Spider-Man 2,'" *The Wall Street Journal* (May 5, 2004), B1. This story ran underneath a larger and more illustrated piece about Christian symbols on t-shirts and baseball caps. A large focus was devoted to the wearing of "Jesus is my Homeboy"/"Mary is my Homegirl" regalia by celebrities.

sacred revenue. Though short-lived, the conflict was palpable, involved two carriers of American identity (economics and sports), and commanded attention in the mass media.

At around the time of the *Spider-Man* controversy, the regionalized dimension of sports in the context of civil religion played out in the Tampa Bay area. On the one hand, the Tampa Bay Lightning's Stanley Cup run against the Calgary Flames brought together many from around the area under the unifying experience of the team's push for victory. It also featured numerous references to the Calgary team playing for all of Canada in hopes of returning the cup to its home country for the first time since 1993. Also at this time, many in the Tampa Bay region came together in the peculiar farewell to former Buccaneers safety John Lynch, who was departing for the Denver Broncos. The public ceremony drew thousands and included players, dignitaries, and politicians. Strikingly, the story about the festivity appearing in the *Tampa Tribune* began, "Only John Lynch could get Gen. Tommy Franks and Monsignor Laurence Higgins on a stage together signing 'Sweet Home Alabama.'"⁶⁰ Indeed, the apotheosis of such an icon was evidenced by one devotee's homemade T-shirt featuring a taped-on photograph of Lynch and the words, "No. 47. A gift from heaven. We love you."⁶¹ His departure from Tampa Bay to Denver marked a cosmological passage, just as his years of on-field performance represented cosmological heroics. On top of all this, as a skilled and talented athlete, a Stanford graduate, and a clean-cut family man, he embodied something of the American dream and imparted an American sense of identity to his worshipers.

Often, and particularly since Richard Nixon's endorsements of baseball and college football during Vietnam-era turmoil, sports appear in the context of the civil

⁶⁰ Katherine Smith, "Farewell Salute to Fan Favorite," *Tampa Tribune* (May 6, 2004), Sports 1.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

religious institution of politics. This was on display in early 2004 when George W. Bush attended the Daytona 500. Not only was the president's appearance designed to attract "NASCAR dads" to the Bush campaign, but it was also a "mana-rich" environment in which politics, sports, and the sacred American identity converged before an immediate audience of some 120,000 and a national audience of millions bound together through the narrative medium of television.⁶² Like all other NASCAR competitions, this event featured a pre-race prayer and performance of the national anthem. However, it also featured Air Force One, political rhetoric, and the president's mid-event departure. All of this supplied narrative discourse for the popular media over the next few weeks before fading from the public consciousness.

At around the same time as the Daytona event and in another politically charged context, the president's state of the union address embodied a flavor of sports as a component of civil religion. In this address, the president, after lauding the war on terror, calling for renewal of the Patriot Act, praising recent economic policy decisions, and asking for more accountability in the no child left behind act, speaks on the issue of drugs and sports. According to this speech, "To help children make right choices, they need good examples. Athletics play such an important role in our society, but, unfortunately, some in professional sports are not setting much of an example."⁶³ He goes on to explain that not only are drugs dangerous, but also "it sends the wrong message."⁶⁴ He then leaves the subject with the exhortation, "I call on team owners, union representatives,

⁶² By far the most popular form of auto racing in the United States, NASCAR's drivers and fans are predominantly white and hail mostly from the "Bible Belt," "Rust Belt," and "Heartland" regions of the country. In distinction from other forms of auto racing, NASCAR exclusively races American-branded vehicles (e.g. Chevrolet, Ford, Dodge).

⁶³ George W. Bush, "State of the Union Address," www.whitehouse.gov (January 20, 2004), 6.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

coaches, and players to take the lead, to send the right signal, to get tough, and to get rid of steroids now.”⁶⁵ Moments later, the president turns his attention to “activist judges” and homosexual marriages with the paranesis that “the same moral tradition that defines marriage also teaches that each individual has dignity and value in God’s sight.”⁶⁶ Immediately following this reference to a typical civil religious notion of God, he then offers, “It’s also important to strengthen our communities by unleashing the compassion of America’s religious institutions,”⁶⁷ and affirms the need for faith-based, government-supported charities. Finally, and in keeping with Bellah’s model, Bush concludes, “May God continue to bless America.”⁶⁸

To take the president’s sentiment one step farther, Senator Joseph Biden, in an attempt to curry support for legislation banning over-the-counter, steroid-like supplements, announced before the U.S. senate, “Baseball is the national pastime, but it’s the repository of the values of this country.”⁶⁹ Moreover, for Biden, “There’s something simply un-American about this. This is about values, about culture, it’s about who we define ourselves to be.”⁷⁰ Without saying it explicitly, Biden implies that the threat is essentially anomie and its target is the sacred American way of life.⁷¹ These are not issues

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Frederic J. Frommer, “McCain Criticizes Baseball Over Steroids,” *Associated Press* (March 10, 2004), sports 2 .

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ This kind of political fixation on the sanctity of American sports is what Jerry Izenberg has in mind when he writes, somewhat bitingly, “Baseball is such an ingrained slice of American culture that mayors, governors, and even presidents have been willing to risk the public specter of a ballpark filled with people hooting at them just for the chance to be photographed for the next day’s paper with a fielder’s glove and a baseball.” Of Vietnam-era sports-as-patriotic-duty narratives, Izenberg observes in similarly sarcastic tones, “If you opposed the war, you opposed America . . . if you opposed America, you opposed football, and if you opposed football, well, my, God, where will it all lead?” *How Many Miles to Camelot?: The All-American Sport Myth* (New York: Holt, 1972), 179, 185. These examples reveal how sports function to buttress the American sacred and its meta-myth in correlation to multiple, seemingly un-related ends.

involving transcendental principles or abstract ideas. Rather, they strike at the inherent sacred-profane dynamic of this-worldly concerns of identity.

In a way that supports Joseph Price's contention the Super Bowl is American culture transmitted in festival form while also revealing numerous other (and perhaps Freudian) considerations to such a theory, the 2004 Super Bowl halftime show not only broadcast a brief exposure of a portion of singer Janet Jackson's chest, but it also featured fellow musician Kid Rock costumed in an American flag-cum-poncho outfit. Both incidents generated discussion, much of it in the context of American cultural values. For purposes of this paper, two samples from the headlines and opinion pages of two Pennsylvania newspapers indicate something of the general tone in sports' connection to civil religion, particularly as it appears among "Mainstreet, USA" communities. According to the *Lancaster New Era*, the "halftime stunt became a full-time national obsession,"⁷² drawing the ire of Federal Communications Commission chairperson Michael Powell. According to Powell, "Our nation's children, parents, and citizens deserve better."⁷³ The U.S. president also weighed in, telling the media, "I missed it . . . I was preparing for the day and fell asleep."⁷⁴ The illustrative element here is not so much what the president or a prominent member of his cabinet thought of the event; instead, the significance is in their being asked at all. The news media, ostensibly representing the collective consciousness of their audiences, felt compelled to seek enlightenment from these public personages. Presumably, the audiences obligingly accepted. Still, despite the end-all-be-all intensity the Jackson exposure took on immediately after the game, within two weeks its significance had essentially escaped the popular imagination.

⁷² Anonymous, "Jackson's Accident Launches FCC Inquiry," *Lancaster New Era* (February 3, 2004), C16.

⁷³ Ibid.

Though secondary in attention to Jackson's partial nudity, Kid Rock's regalia generated voluminous civil religious language, much of it not unlike Richard Kondash's February 11 letter to the editor. In the letter, Kondash declares, "Kid Rock owes our veterans, fighting armed forces and the American people an apology."⁷⁵ Before making this assertion, Kondash cites how the musician specifically violated Federal Flag Code 107, page 4, section 4, subsections B and D. In both the Jackson and Kid Rock cases, the ostensible offense challenges certain core beliefs of some community, such as families or the armed forces and, by implication, all of America. Much of the rhetoric regarding the recent Super Bowl event mirrors what James Michener concluded in the mid-1970s:

It was during a Monday-night NFL half-time show that I first became aware that football games had become a heady mix of patriotism, sex, violence and religion. A bloody first half ended when hordes of personnel flooded the field, carrying flags, and trumpets and small cannon, and rifles, and Bibles. . . . This was a combination of American values hard to beat, with marines and rabbis and priests adding sanction to the affair. It was difficult, at times to tell whether I was in a strip-tease show, an armory, a cathedral or a ball park.⁷⁶

In sum, it seems, sports melds together diffuse and seemingly disparate components of American culture in a way that, to the uninitiated, seems absurd. Yet, for the insider or the one familiar with sports' place in contemporary America, spectacles like the one Michener describes or like the recent Super Bowl make perfect sense because of the taken-for-granted nature of cosmological religion in which these events happen because that is "just the way things are."

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Richard Kondash, "Misuse of U.S. Flag was the Real Outrage," *Morning Call* (February 11, 2004), A16.

⁷⁶ James Michener, *Sports in America* (New York: Random House, 1976), 475.

Analysis of Data

What the foregoing examples reveal is that, as in most any cosmological system, in American civil religion, a variety of carriers express and grant experience of the sacred, which, again, is here understood as the sense of American identity. The carriers can be as broad as economics, technology, or politics and as specific as family, locality, or even religious community. However, the most wide-scale and actively engaged carriers are those of popular culture, with television, film, and music being particularly notable for their ability to reach and capture mass audiences. Among popular culture elements, sports strikingly stand out for the number of followers they attract, how widely recognized and accepted they are, and the manner in which they fuse various cultural myths, rituals, and archetypes.

In an Albanesean sense, sports also have a tendency to become synonymous with the culture as whole. Somewhat whimsically, this is expressed in the traditional “As American as apple pie and baseball” adage, but is attested to in the inseparability of sports, culture, and many Americans’ self-understanding of identity. Just to take an example, one struggles to imagine the spectacle that is the Super Bowl apart from American culture. The same holds true for countless other sporting events, figures, and related narratives. This is where civil religion figures in instructively. In cases where culticly significant features of American culture, like sports, fluidly integrate with the culture’s identity as a whole, something intrinsically American occurs that shapes American’s perceptions of the world in the context of their shared national identity. This perception-influencing process occurs daily and nearly continually, though mostly to an implicit extent. To this end, as its vehicles such as sports suggest, civil religion fits a

cosmological framework in which religion does not stand apart from culture nor is it institutionally separated from the fabric of society. Rather, it is an ingrained part of American life that operates on a collective and subconscious level.

Chapter Four

Conclusion

It would seem, then, that if sports are to be considered in a functional analysis, the case is made more plausible and the study more solid by understanding them as operating in the context of cosmological religion. In turn, this case is further made plausible in supposing that as a cosmological form of religion, sports do not provide an overarching, culture-inclusive system of mediating ultimate concern. Rather, they exist as a means to encounter the sacred of American civil religion. As such, this consideration has important implications for the concept of American civil religion in that, namely, it has a degree of cosmological orientation, one that encompasses a large portion of culture and various institutions. At least at a conceptual level, this has significant implications for contemporary American culture and how religion plays a part and, to some extent, defines it. Perhaps, then, one arrives at understanding of why sports are so significant by synthesizing the work of Mircea Eliade⁷⁷ with Johan Huizinga. Not only is the person in this culture homo-religiosus, but s/he is such because s/he is also homo-ludens. Moreover, this religious-play characteristic is intrinsically connected to one's ontological "Americanness" in a way that reveals broader possibilities for the civil religion thesis in a contemporary American setting. Yet, these possibilities are not so broad as to obviate the concept or reject the unique way it handles the specifically American features of culture.

⁷⁷ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* trans. Willard R. Trask (San Diego: Harcourt, 1959 [1957]).

Civil Religion

This paper's conception of civil religion still finds that figures like Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Jr., are civil religious leaders. However, in these examples (and others similar to them), the cultural sacred being represented transcends no further than the immediate scene at hand. The American sacred resides in the physical-material (read: natural) world, often in a palpable and almost tangible manner. That is, in cyclical fashion, what is sacred is inseparably connected to the next election, the current senate debate, the status of the Supreme Court, or the outcome of the big game. In a large-scale manner, sports reveal these dimensions of American civil religion. Typically featuring several myths that support the meta-myth of American identity, such as the myth of success, that of equality, that of teamwork, and that of individuality, sports also unleash variegated pieces of civil religious imagery. In carrying such elements of civil religion to Americans, sports follow the cosmological pattern of civil religion in that they are totemic, cyclical, and location-sanctifying. As such, they jibe with the American sacred and manner in which it is mediated. In this conception, the sacred resides in the physical material, taken-for-granted, and seemingly natural setting of the stadium, arena, or playing field. Yet, short of operating as religions themselves, sports function as a component of a broad understanding of civil religion as the sacred they represent is not confined to sports but is instead that of the culture as whole and is carried to Americans through multiple vehicles.

To explore this understanding by rounding out the concept of American civil religion with an Albanesean postulation of cultural religion, one can readily identify a meta-myth supporting a host of secondary and tertiary myths in contemporary American

sports. Following the events of September 11, 2001, that year's World Series featured the U.S. president throwing out the first pitch at Yankee Stadium, a bald-eagle demonstration, and the signing of both "The Star-Spangled Banner" and "God Bless America." The former has been a hallmark of American sporting events for many years. The latter is becoming increasingly present, especially at baseball games. This is consistent with Major League Baseball's perpetual concern with being the "national pastime." More importantly, it palpably embodies a sense of the American sacred in the material setting of a ballpark that is at once quite Durkheimian and strikingly cosmological.

Equally illustrative is the credibility with which sports figures' commentaries on American culture receive audiences. As an example, though former football player Dave Meggyesy launches notable criticisms of sports, football, and American culture in *Out of their League*⁷⁸ his marginal skills as an athlete have rendered his remarks obscure in prominence and influence. In contrast, however, Muhammad Ali's critiques of American politics and culture, in line with the prophetic strains of civil religion, have always been widely prominent and have (thanks in large part to film and television) contributed to the increasing glow of his sacred, heroic aura. Ali and his comments are culturally significant because the mana-esque nature of his talent and skill as an athlete, combined with his charismatic public persona, have established his sacred, cultic status in the popular consciousness. Interestingly, most Americans have likely never heard of Dave Meggyesy, even the most ardent sports enthusiasts. Yet, only few Americans would not recognize Ali, even the most avowed non-sports fans. This is what the sacred is about in a contemporary American context. It binds together all familiar with the sport or athlete,

generates widely recognized narratives, and ingrains itself in the societal fabric.

Moreover, this sacred and its various manifestations operate within the immediate, here-and-now location of the physical, material world in a way that inextricably connects to an American sense of identity.

In a similar kind of example, Jackie Robinson is heroic and culturally significant because he broke the color-line in Major League Baseball in the mid-twentieth century, which fundamentally altered the American racial landscape. With an interpretation of civil religion expanded only slightly beyond Bellah's borders, Robinson is a civil religious icon on-par with Rosa Parks and nearly on the same level as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. However, had Robinson lacked the talent and skill as one of the all-time great players, one wonders what his lasting impact would have been. This illustrates the mutually reinforcing manner in which sports and the American sacred operate. That is, as Robinson's athletic prowess gained him notoriety and a relatively widespread degree of acceptance, it allowed what he represented to change the culture. As a result, not only is he a baseball hero, but he is a cultural hero, who manifests the sacred American civil rights narrative, which even Bellah would grant is perfectly at home in his conception of American civil religion. Moreover, neither Robinson's nor Ali's are exceptional cases. As both Albanese and Mathisen would recognize, they are just two examples of how sports and culture blend to implicitly inform Americans of their place in the world. In doing so, it marks the irresistible force of the cultural sacred's defining of the shared understanding of national identity.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Dave Meggyesy, *Out of their League* (Berkeley: Ramparts, 1970).

⁷⁹ The Robinson example presents a case where the cosmological and transcendental components of civil religion collide. That he gained prominence as a skilled athlete fits the cosmological model; however, the

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A notable dimension of the Meggyesy-Ali dichotomy is the way it reveals how that which is frequently encountered or widely accepted illuminates the beliefs and values of the culture. Ali stands out in the popular consciousness where Meggyesy cannot. Not only was and is Ali a compelling, attention-getting celebrity, but he also upholds the basic American myth of success.⁸⁰ In short, he is a winner; he is “the greatest.” Over the course of his celebrity, he has been both frequently encountered and (especially recently) widely accepted. His lighting of the torch at the 1996 summer Olympics in Atlanta marked the apotheosis and galvanization of his culturally iconic standing. Likewise, a year later, when Major League Baseball instituted a league-wide retirement of Robinson’s uniform number, the nationwide ceremonies had all the characteristics of a civil religious piacular ritual. At stadiums across the country, hundreds of thousands of sports fans participated in the large-scale requiem, which was carried out at each park some time between the national anthem and the first pitch.

Similar examples abound with other athletes, other sports, and, to be sure, other areas of popular culture. Such examples highlight some of the clarity studies of religion and popular culture can shed on the nature of contemporary culture. In so doing, these types of studies can also bring to a number of issues relevant to the study of religion as a whole. For example, though relatively untouched in the literature, the much-permuted, -disputed, and –decentralized civil religion thesis might gain a greater sense of shape and direction in the context of religion and popular culture. The contribution this paper hopes

manner in which he changed baseball, sports, and all of America represents the order-questioning facet of transcendental religion that is active in the civil rights movement.

to offer is its understanding of civil religion's character and function in the experience of American life by recognizing the variety of civil religious vehicles active in contemporary culture, of which sports are particularly significant.

Modestly, this paper has sought such a goal and has attempted to impart the manner in which the study of religion and popular culture addresses the nature of contemporary culture by upholding the religious studies academic ideal of a multi-disciplinary approach. In arguing that the cosmological nature of sports suggests the cosmological nature of American civil religion, this examination has attempted to bridge multiple perspectives in its analysis. Through this religious studies perspective, it finds that in contemporary America, sports are a central component of the construction of reality and bear witness to how the experience of the American sacred brings people together around a cyclical, this-worldly commitment. At one level, this might account for why sports command so many hours of attention, so much space in the mass media, and so many millions of dollars every year in the United States. At another level, it might also indicate why, in American culture, that is just the way things are.

⁸⁰ Ali's esteemed status in the popular American consciousness was on display in July 2004, when he tossed the ceremonial first pitch at Major League Baseball All-Star Game in Houston. This makes sense in the context of the game's emphasis on talent, skill, and the American obsession with success.

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