

*The Holy Trinity of American Sports: Civil Religion in Football, Baseball and Basketball* by Craig A Forney. Mercer University Press, 2007. 224pp., Pb. \$25.00, ISBN-13: 9780881461732.

*Game Day and God: Football, Faith, and Politics in the American South* by Eric Bain-Selbo. Mercer University Press, 2009. 253pp, \$35.00. ISBN-13: 9780881461558; Pb., \$25.00. ISBN-13: 9780881464177.

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These volumes are welcome additions to a fine “Sports and Religion” series edited by Joseph L. Price and published by Mercer. They have some common elements, notably the treatment of sport as civil religion, but each has a distinct focus. Bain-Selbo’s book (as the title indicates) is anchored in a particular cultural *locus*, and, rather than ranging over sports generally, concentrates on American Football—specifically its college manifestation—and spends a good deal of time thinking about fans rather than players. Forney’s attention is on elite sports rather than mass participation leisure, and he also trains his lens on the grandstands rather more than the players. There is little in either book which would challenge or contradict the other, but for this reader at least—while one finds much to admire in both volumes—Bain-Selbo’s book, with its more specific concentration and some grounding in empirical data, seems more compelling.

Forney’s contribution is somewhat experimental, as the author admits, in seeking to give an account of sports as a particular, ritualised outworking of American Civil Religion. He begins by describing some features of the latter, and then outlines Ninian Smart’s account of religion as a phenomenon with six dimensions (Smart later added a seventh). The book then seeks to map American football, baseball, and basketball on to these dimensions: ritual, mythical, doctrinal, ethical, social, and experiential.

There are some weaknesses in Forney’s approach. These include some editing problems, but most significantly the highly speculative feel of a great deal of material. One chapter begins with a quotation from the colourful baseball player and manager, Leo Durocher: “Baseball is like a church. Many attend. Few understand.” The problem with such assertions is always the somewhat obscurantist logic. But in trying to make us under-

stand, some of the points made, as sport is mapped on to the religious, seem frankly far-fetched. In baseball, for instance, we are told that the white ball suggests baseball's portrayal of the "American mythology of the perfect world to come," and connects with the White House, the white colouring of Washington's various national monuments, the White Paper of the nation's constitutional documents, and so on. The lack of empirical material is a handicap for Forney, and greater attention to socio-economic factors would help, and also qualify, some of his arguments. While one can make a case for each of these games as expressions of American character (a *sporting* "American exceptionalism"), the development of each owes a great deal to commercial factors. Baseball is probably the first sport to be commercially exploited for the mass market in a modern way, and while this might also say something about America, it would have been useful to have included some of these developmental considerations in the discussion.

However, Forney does succeed in showing the very American character of these sports and how they reflect aspects of what one might call the "national psyche." As his concluding summary puts it:

the sports trinity discloses three streams of thought foundational to the American worldview. Football portrays the element of realism in the national culture, generating concern for the recognition of harsh realities. Baseball illustrates the idealism of the United States. It expresses strong imagination for an ideal life to come, while basketball presents the pragmatic philosophy of the country, considered relevant for the most common situations. (206)

When one considers the prominence of national anthems and flags at these fixtures one sees their nationalistic resonance, and the link to civil religion similarly begins to appear compelling. Forney also draws on the work of Victor Turner to consider the way fans are drawn into the effects of sport through liminal experiences in the stadia, and this is a promising approach. While not all the details will convince, Forney adds to our understanding of sport as a manifestation of a peculiarly American civil religion, and anyone interested in either subject will want to read this book.

Where Forney begins with Smart, Bain-Selbo grounds his initial observations in Durkheim's work on religion, as he explores the sacred in sport. He also draws heavily on the work of Mircea Eliade, and his argument is that the *homo religiosus* can express itself either through organized religion or through the myths, symbols and rituals of sport—of which he gives a persuasive sketch. Durkheim's account of totems allows Bain-Selbo to suggest that the team, as the totem, comes to represent the fans and their

community. This is then linked to the distinctive self-identity of the South, which is shown to be still in an awkward relationship to historical pre- and post-Civil War realities.

The longest chapter in the book, in fact more than one third of the total, examines the history and identity of the South. American Civil Religion in the South has a particular flavour, associated with Southern identity. College football, with its combination of local or regional team identities, performing on a national stage, has a key role in the rituals of this Civil Religion.

Civil Religion is music—hymns and Southern rock, country and traditional/folk. It is church (particularly charismatic and emotional) and community (and food, lots of food). It is a history of courage, shame, stubbornness, and honour. It is the Lost Cause: sometimes racist, despicable, and divisive, and sometimes uplifting and uniting. Woven into this civil religion is college football, drawing from and adding to these various elements and often holding them all together at once on beautiful Saturdays in towns and cities all across the South. (174)

One of the outcomes of “game day” is the creation of (in Victor Turner’s terms) a *communitas* in which the crowd experience a solidarity which overcomes divisions of social role and location: here white and black (Bain-Selbo is unflinching in his examination of racism), rich and poor, are made into one. But Bain-Selbo’s chapter discussing Marxist critiques of sport, also exposes how this *communitas* can serve the *status quo* by distracting us from, or concealing, structural injustices. Hereabouts is a tension in some of his observations which he does not quite resolve or clarify: on the one hand suggesting that sport is complicit with social injustice, while simultaneously arguing that sport helps overcome it.

Throughout, Bain-Selbo backs up some of his claims with survey work conducted amongst fans. Here he finds, amongst other things, that fans tend to describe their experience on game day in religious terms. He discusses how valid this is, opting to understand an experience as religious experience not by reference to the “object” which has stimulated it, but by the way in which the experience is interpreted and described. This in turn allows him to suggest that many Southerners (and, presumably, people all over the world who are fans of other sports) will find no incompatibility between experiencing sport as “religious” and in being adherents of traditional organised religion too. In fact, regarding the American South he makes a strong case for the peaceful co-existence of these two “religious” phenomena, tracing their interaction and connections to regional identity.

Bain-Selbo finishes his book by seeing off fifteen objections to understanding sport in religious terms. This functions, to some extent, as a summary of the preceding argument. His own conclusion, following Durkheim, is that sport may indeed be gradually replacing traditional religion but in form rather than substance. Bain-Selbo appears to believe that we are indeed, as Eliade suggested, very much *homo religiosus*, but that we may express this in various ways. One perhaps detects a suggestion that belief in any objective or divine source of religious experiences will decline, but that a Durkheimian need to give allegiance to something bigger than ourselves may well find expression through sport, and in the American South in particular through college football. Once again, like Forney, there is very little attention to the commercial aspects of sport, and as I read his final pages I found myself recalling—with a sense of foreboding—the movie *Rollerball*! Whether one agrees with the conclusions Bain-Selbo reaches, anyone interested in religion and sport will find much to ponder in his often persuasive account.