Editorial

Three items in this Issue are linked with Sport in various ways, and so allow us to doff our hats in recognition of this year’s Olympic Games. While the idealism that accompanied their “revival” in 1908 may seem to make them an obvious topic of study, as a development begging for consideration as a possible instance of some form of implicit or secular religion, some may feel that the Olympics movement, having lost much of its shine by the end of the twentieth century, is no longer a suitable candidate.

However, that would be to mis-understand the concept of implicit religion (and, in my opinion), the concept of religion. Such misunderstanding (of “religion”), which sometimes seems widespread, can have serious effects, partly because it hobbles intelligible communication, but, even more importantly, because of the passion (positive or negative) with which the concept is sometimes accompanied.

These disadvantages come to the fore when the concept (or that to which it is taken to refer) is treated as something that can be “believed in” (or “disbelieved in”): something approaching a discrete entity, that can then be worshipped, as a god, or abhorred, as a devil.

The fervour aroused by “religion” as “a whole,” or by specific instances of what it refers to (an institution, understanding, symbol), may foster esprit de corps and so, participation (however vicarious); but, like any superstition (such as a “belief in science”), it is inevitably partial, and so tacitly sectarian. It (and its peers) need cutting down to size, surely? As mere (but probably inevitable) dimensions of human being, rather than things in themselves.

The Duke of Wellington is said to have described the Battle of Waterloo as a “nice” occurrence; meaning that, until the end, neither army was in the ascendant. Contingency was the rule of the day; the result was unpredictable (until of course it had happened!) Whether “religion” exists may likewise be a “nice” question, albeit of longer duration: valuable to explore, useless to dispute. Whether it can be “believed in,” however, seems indisputable: everyday evidence suggests it is believed in (positively or negatively)—and that whether or not it can be said to exist.

Mere students of religion or implicit religion, therefore, can ask in what ways the classical Games might have been religious, or the modern
Games might be implicitly religious, without any suggestion of judgement (as a scan can suggest the gender of the unborn foetus). Subsequently, as would-be holistic human beings, naturally we may go on to respond as persons; but that is another matter (or so students, of any topic, hope and believe). Students could be described as devoted to the god of objectivity—even, and especially, when exploring that most fascinating of topics, human subjectivity.

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