

From Season to Season. Sports as American Religion, edited by Joseph L. Price. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2001. ISBN-13: 9780865546943, 240pp., hb \$45.00.

The Great God Baseball. Religion in Modern Baseball Fiction, by Allen E. Hye. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004. ISBN-13: 9780865549319, 192 pp., HB \$40.00.

In the manner of the books under review, I might as well begin with a confession: I am a sports junkie. I might also be a scholar of religion and a secular theologian, but for me transcendence occurs most often when I worship at the shrine of sports (followed very closely by music and art—just to keep going my renaissance credentials). As such, sports, for many academics like myself, is viewed as a type of guilty secret; it's not quite serious, it's not quite real and, for many, in good neo-marxist mode, it's the opiate of the masses—and academics and intellectuals, for all their public nay-saying, are really private snobs and *élitists*. But these books remind us that if we ignore sports then we wilfully reject perhaps one of the most pervasive forms of religion—implicit and often explicit—in the modern world.

As I write this review the Olympics are playing in the background. Michael Phelps is doing impossible things in the pool and attaining a divine status as water god—a modern day Poseidon. Elsewhere moments of transcendence occur, time slows, crowds both present and global are transfixed, moved, watching in awe and wonder. We utter prayers in a variety of forms, faiths and piety, as events occur in ritualized space; territory is held and taken, order given and rejected, limits are transgressed and new possibilities unfold. Heroes are created, idols are shown to have clay feet, sins are committed and the pantheon of gods increases. For many, a type of secular Darshan occurs: the object of devotion is seen, and in seeing the crowd of votaries, an encounter of mutual affirmation occurs. And then, to emphasize the point, on my television, the local NZ pop band Op-shop's anthem "No Ordinary Thing" plays and soars over a montage of athletes in superslow-mo action and emotion.

All those things that I can find in the Olympics also occur in other forms of sports—and such thinking about sports and religion has taken its lead from America. Perhaps I should qualify my opening statement, for the rejection of sports by intellectuals tends to occur more often in non-American contexts. As is continually emphasized in *From Season to Season* the American ability and willingness to see sports as forms and types of

religion and religious experience is perhaps because America, of all Western nations, is still a religious nation. This is perhaps most explicitly expressed in Allen Hye's *The Great God Baseball*, which critically evaluates 9 baseball novels that deal with religion in forms traversing folk religion, mainstream Christianity and Voodoo. Interpreted via Bernard Malamud's *The Natural* as one mythic text, and W.P. Kinsella's *Shoeless Joe* (retitled, in cinema, as *Field of Dreams*) as the other, baseball is positioned as the central *religare* of American life and culture. For in baseball ritual and sacred space combine to restore, renew and recreate American life with the "green cathedrals" of ball parks replicating the original meaning of sacred in being "set apart." Hye is neither a scholar of religion nor a theologian, rather a Professor of German and Danish. This is an important point, for Hye's text arises out of a course taught on Baseball and American culture and reads like a series of reworked lectures written for the layperson. A self-confessed baseball fiction evangelist, Hye writes an accessible text that for this reader, at least, served his initial purpose. While I live in a non-baseball country, Hye's infectious passion for both baseball and the novels meant I still wanted to read many of these books for myself, even though I was left somewhat unmoved and uninspired by his analysis. For the importance of this book is not so much the rather pedestrian plot summaries and reportage of religious themes, but rather that it does spread the "good news" of these novels. Hye is an enthusiast and the book conveys this—even to the point of being uneven; we get, in a varied appendix, graphs, pictures, faux-biblical baseball quotes, and a quiz on denominational responses to baseball. These would be informative and entertaining undergraduate lectures, but they are reportage-heavy and theory-light. Other scholars will want to read and interpret these books for themselves.

Joseph Price's edited collection *From Season to Season* is a much better work of scholarship, containing a great deal of interest for both scholars of religion and theologians of culture. Price, Professor of Theology at Whit-tier College, has collected an eclectic series of articles ranging from the central focus on Baseball and American Football to include Basketball, Ice Hockey and Professional Wrestling. Price contributes seven essays, each interesting but conversely suffering from a repetition of themes and sources. This is a continual trap scholars can fall into—we cannibalize and regurgitate our own work for different journals over time; this only becoming apparent when we attempt to anthologize ourselves. Yet Price shows himself to be a fine and innovative scholar of religion and sports and, via his website, I was delighted to learn he is currently writing two texts of his

own on the rituals of American Football and Baseball—for he writes with skill and clarity, expressing an infectious knowledge and enthusiasm. The quibbles about repetition are minor though, for Price demonstrates that he is able to reinterpret and move on from the central texts that continually appear in his own work and that of others, in this exciting and informative collection.

It is useful to consider these four central texts: Michael Novak's *The Joy of Sports*, Catherine Albanese's *America: Religions and Religion*, Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* and the work of Mircea Eliade on myth and ritual, for each, in their own way, provide a differing perspective on the role of sports in American religious life and culture. For those of us who best know Novak as a latter day neo-con and free market apostle, his *Joy of Sports* (1976) is a salutary reminder of the scope of his interests and abilities. This work serves as a nodal point in the analysis of sport and religion: here was someone taken seriously as a philosopher, theologian and scholar of religion who in turn was taking sports seriously. In his own way, this work made valid the question later posed by Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore's essay *Through the Eyes of Mircea Eliade. US Football as Religion*, where she asks: "If mainline institutional religion no longer holds sway amongst the dominant culture as it once did, what has replaced it? What does draw attention, fascination, and in the long run, pious devotion?" (115).

Albanese provides the central model of sports as civil religion, in a sense offering it as another expression of American religious life and meaning. This can be seen to extend and encompass Will Herberg's famous tripartite classification of American identity and religious life: Protestant, Catholic, Jew. Now, we can also add, sports fan. What becomes apparent is the way in which sport, in a multi-faith and multi-cultural environment serves to both overcome differences by participation in the religion of sports but also to perpetuate distinct religious and regional identities. It would be easy to reduce this to the oft-quoted remark by the sports writer Frank Deford, that over the last years of the twentieth century, "sports have now become the opiate of the American masses," yet we are continually reminded that this "secular kind of faith" continues alongside a vibrant, varied and dominant traditional religious expression in America.

Perhaps a way to understand this is to re-enage with Johan Huizinga's seminal 1954 text *Homo Ludens*, which relocated the central focus and meaning of humanity as that expressed in play. Reading *From Season to Season* it appears that the pervasive religious culture of America may actually allow all of life to be reinvested with religious expression and meaning.

If, as Huizinga suggests, to be human is to play, then traditional religion, that seeks to separate itself off from play, seeking often to denigrate play itself, faces a sectarian identity. In considering this, I have always been fascinated with the degree to which in secular Western societies, the Catholic Church has been very careful to keep its involvement in sports. Via Huizinga, it is possible that Catholic sports clubs may do far more than actually perpetuate a Catholic community; they may also serve to ensure a holistic, *Homo Ludens* basis for everyday life. For, as recounted in *From Season to Season*, the Puritans in early America fought a continual and losing battle against the urge to play. Therefore the rise and societal integration of Muscular Christianity may have actually served as a crucial element in negating the sectarian emphasis in Protestant culture. And yet, can we ever really see a Protestant theologian writing a book entitled “The Joy of Sports”? A Post-Protestant perhaps. This raises another important issue, that of the shift of American popular religious life away from a traditionally understood expression of Protestantism towards, as Bloom stated in *The American Religion*, a type of gnosticism. For Novak’s “Joy” is shared across the denominational divides and sits central to American self-belief and self-expression. So what is glimpsed and shared in these acts of joy?

A possible answer is to be found in Eliade. For those of us trained and working outside America, and especially the influence of the Chicago School of Religion, Eliade has become a type of disciplinary bogey-man. In short, you either “get” Eliade, and his work becomes a foundational hermeneutic or you don’t. Reading Price’s collection, I finally “got” Eliade. For almost every essay engaged with Eliade, either implicitly or, often, quite explicitly. On considering this, in reading the ways in which Eliade was used as a hermeneutical tool, what I suddenly “got,” regarding Eliade, is not that his analysis holds for institutional, traditional or orthodox religion, for his *History of Religion* raises too many difficult issues for what becomes too often an uncritical re-application. Rather, Eliade, as mythologizer, offers a hermeneutic not of the past, but rather of the present. American scholars have been so ready to take up Eliade, not because of what Eliade is saying about religion in the past, but rather because of what he reflects of implicit religion in the present. We get cosmic mountains, mythic cosmos, violence as transgressive redemption, myth, fetish and ritual, not as past archetypes and events, but rather as expressed in the everyday, democratic, participatory and voluntary world of sports in contemporary American culture. Novak’s “Joy” occurs because a society open to religion is also open to religious myth as an interpretive device of culture, entertainment and

communal participation. Eliade “works” especially well in contemporary American societal and cultural analysis of religion because he offers a way to take such forms seriously in the present day. To trace the pitcher’s mound back to a cosmic mountain is not a fact, but an interpretation that enables baseball to transcend a functionalist interpretation as sport and entertainment. To respond to team sports as mythic contests, as seasons of mythic renewals, as rituals of meaning for both participants and spectators, as the creation of sacred spaces and narratives, allows those of us who wish to, to re-mythologize our own lives and culture.

Therefore a central question is what type of religion is sports? James Mathisen, having raised the various possibilities of “religion” (“quasi-religion,” “Civil religion,” “surrogate religion” and “secular religion”), opts for “folk religion,” for folk religion not only reflects the beliefs and norms of a culture but also creates its own values and myths and projects them into the culture. As Mathisen states, folk religion, in its combination of belief, myth and practice, provides “ritual, cultic practices [that] reinforce the values shared by a community of believers” and evokes history and tradition. Price goes further, labelling sports “An American Apotheosis” that shapes their world and sustains their ways of engaging with it. Yet is it just the underlying religiosity of American culture and social life that enables such readings to occur? As Price notes, the issue of whether sports can be viewed as religious or not is the result of what is determined to be “religion,” by what is taken to constitute “religion.” It could be that the fear, dismissal and rejection of religion in Western societies outside America, conversely also resulted in an unwillingness to engage with the possibility of interpreting sports as religion. Similarly, as is noted, it is often sociologists, historians and anthropologists who wish to qualify and limit readings of sports as religion, in their efforts to limit religion itself within traditional, institutional and sacramental forms. Therefore, in their readings, sports can be anything but religion or religious; or, in a misreading of Eliade, it becomes a return to and of the primitive, a type of cultural throw-back. Likewise, the idea of sports as opiate suggests that participation occurs unthinkingly, and that there is another, more real life to be led, lived and expressed—if only the masses could be saved.

My view after reading these books is more in line with that noted by Price when he states that definitions and stated characteristics of “religion” never, in fact, encompass or match that of anything claimed to be “religious” or a “religion.” The claims are those of ideals, but religions are lived, expressed, created and encountered in the real world. Some sports take on

implicit religious forms, for others these are more explicit. For some the application of “religion” is pejorative, for others it is restorative. What we do get are both a *religare*, “a binding together,” and a *relegere* “to re-read.” Perhaps, at heart, the role of sports is as a secular religion, but secular in the sense of *saeculum*—the world of shared experience. For as the theologian Gabriel Vahanian reminded us in his recent *Tillich and the New Religious Paradigm* (2005): “...in a pluralistic world, it is not religion we have in common. What we have in common is the secular.” In a slight amendment, I would argue that what we also have in common is sport, and we can reinterpret it, re-mythologize it and our lives in the secular, enabling us to express that which we may choose to call our basic spiritual dimensions. Sport is an American religion, sometimes implicit, often explicit. The challenge arises for those of us outside America to engage with how sport variously can, does and may operate in religious and spiritual forms in our, more secular, societies. Is our failure to do so, not only a fear and distrust of sports, but also a fear and distrust of religion itself?

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