

## RELI 267: Religion and Sports

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### Description

What is at stake in a sporting event? For many, the connections between sports and religion are evident and powerful. Essayist David Foster Wallace once described watching Roger Federer play tennis as a "religious experience." Religion scholar David Chidester speaks of the "church of baseball." Phil Jackson, the winningest basketball coach in history, refers to the "spiritual lessons" in "sacred hoops." To others, however, this connection is at best tenuous and at worse degrading to religion. These critics ask, How can something as worldly and meaningless as a game be considered sacred? Another set of critics see the contemporary spectacle of sports as part of the capitalist strategy to render individuals passive and accepting of the corporate status quo.

This class explores the contested connections between sports and religion and challenges us to reconsider our notions of what these phenomena may be.

Students will consider how the Olympics or the Super Bowl function as both religious and political entities. We will take up the question of how being a fan is akin to being a religious adherent and examine a variety of social, political, and psychological intersections of sports and religion. Muhammed Ali's conversion to Islam or Tim Tebow's prayerful pose on the football field are examples of this. Through this course, we confront the ways in which sports has the power to establish, reinforce, and also challenge religious and political awareness and identities.

### Required Texts

Phil Jackson, *Sacred Hoops* (Hyperion)  
W. Timothy Gallwey, *The Inner Game of Tennis* (Random House)  
Michael Novak, *The Joy of Sports* (Madison)

### Course Requirements

- participation: 15%

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- Come to class with and having read the assigned material. We encourage you to mark up your texts with your own notes.
  - Come to class with questions about the day's reading.
  - Engage both critically and respectfully with others.
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- 2 short (4-5 page) papers: 40%

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- See syllabus for due dates.
  - Topics to be assigned.
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- final paper (8 pages): 45%

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- Due date and topics TBA.
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### **Students with Special Needs**

"Academic accommodations are available for students with documented disabilities. Please schedule an appointment with the instructor early in the semester to discuss any accommodations for this course which have been approved by the Director of Disability and Support Services as indicated in your accommodation letter."

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## **September 1 - September 7**

### **9/3: Class Introduction**

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- **John Oliver on FIFA, soccer, and religion:**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DIJEt2KU33I>
  - **Susan Sarandon and the "Church of Baseball":**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ECnIL4RY8PQ>
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## **September 8 - September 14**

### **Week I: "It's only a Game": The Significance of Play (9/8-10)**

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- Johan Huizinga, "Nature and Significance of Play" (1-27), "The Play-Element in Contemporary Civilization" (195-199)
  - Clifford Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese Cockfight"
  - Paul Weiss, "The Urge to Win," in *Sport: A Philosophic Inquiry*
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## **September 15 - September 21**

### **Week II: Sports as Religion (9/15-17)**

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- Roberto Cipriani, "Sports as (Spi)rituality, Eqionox Publishing, 2012
  - David Chidester, "The Church of Baseball, the Fetish of Coca-Cola, and the Potlach of Rock 'n' Roll," in *Religion and Popular Culture* or Joseph L. Price, "An American Apotheosis: Sports as Popular Religion," in *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, eds Forbes
  - Michael Novak, "The Natural Religion," "The Metaphysics of Sports," "Sacred Space, Sacred Time"
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## **September 22 - September 28**

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### Week III. Rise of Sports in American Culture (9/22-24)

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- Clifford Putney, "Introduction," "God in the Gym," "Conclusion," *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America 1880-1920*
  - Stanley Hauerwas, "Foreward" and Christopher Evans, "Baseball as Civil Religion: The Genesis of an American Creation Story," in *The Faith of 50 Million*, eds Evans and Herzog
  - J. A Mathisen, "From Civil Religion to Folk Religion: the Case of American Sport," in *Sport and Religion*, ed Hoffman
  - [Siltanen, "Yes, A Super Bowl Ad is Really Worth Four million Dollars," Forbes, January 2014](#)
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## September 29 - October 5

### Week IV Sports and Social Cohesion: Communal Effervescence (9/29-10/1)

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- Lonnie D. Kliever, "God and Games in Modern Culture," in *From Season to Season: Sports as American Religion*, ed Price.
  - Grimes, "Modes of Ritual Sensibility" in *Beginnings in Ritual Studies* (Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 1995)
  - Campbell, "The Importance of Rites" in *Myths to Live By* (New York: Bantam Books, 1971)
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## October 6 - October 12

### Week V Embodiments of the Heroic & The Mythos of Sports (10/6-8)

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- Hughes-Hallett, "Achilles" in *Heroes: Saviors, Traitors, and Supermen* (New York: Knopf, 2004)
  - Myth and Psych: The Evolution of Consciousness, David Kalsched & Alan Jones
  - Jung et al. the Hero Myth, in *Man and his Symbols*
  - Barthes, "The World of Wrestling"
  - Remillard, "Steeler Nation"
  - Charles Wilson, "The Death of Bear Bryant: Myth and Ritual in the Modern South," in *Southern Faiths from Faulkner to Elvis*
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## October 13 - October 19

### Week VI The Anti-Hero: Ali and the Nation of Islam (10/13-10/15)

Monday

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- David K. Wiggins, "Victory for Allah: Muhammad Ali, the Nation of Islam and American Society," in *Ali: The Peoples Champ*, ed Gorn
  - Maureen Smith, "Muhammad Speaks and Muhammad Ali: intersections of the Nation of Islam and sport in the 1960s," in *With God on Their Side*, ed Magdalinski
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- Jack Olsen, "Learning Elijah's Advanced Message in Hate," "A Case of Conscience," *Sports Illustrated*, 1966.
  - George Plimpton, "Miami Notebook: Cassius Clay and Malcolm X," in *The Muhammad Ali Reader*
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### Wednesday

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- Othello Harris, "Muhammed Ali and the Revolt of the Black Athlete," in *Ali: The People's Champ*
  - Michael Oriard, "Muhammad Ali: The Hero in the Age of Mass Media"
  - Gordon Parks, "The Redemption of the Champion," in *Ali Reader*
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### Optional

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- The Case of Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf:
    - Film; 50min "By the Dawn's Early Light: Chris Jackson's Journey to Islam," in our library.
    - Zareena Grewal, "Lights, Camera, Suspension: Freezing the Frame on the Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf Anthem Controversy," *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society*, June 2007
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### FALL PAPER DUE

**Friday October 17 @5pm in Moodle Dropbox**

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## October 20 - October 26

FALL BREAK

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## October 27 - November 2

**Week VII: With God on My Side: Evangelical Christianity and Sports (10/27-29)**

### Monday

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- Baker, "Making a Pitch for Jesus," in *Playing with God*
  - Frank Deford, "Religion in Sport," *Sports Illustrated* 1976.
  - Hoffman, "Prayers Out of Bounds"
  - Tim Tebow Focus on Family Commercial
  - Tim Tebow interview:
  - Outside the Lines on Tim Tebow:
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- The Daily Show, Tim Tebow: <http://thedailyshow.cc.com/videos/wv7ji0/tim-tebow>
- Mark Jackson street preaching: <http://www.worldstarhiphop.com/videos/video.php?v=wshhzbQ5C09829134CEK>

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### Weds

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- Hoffman, "Notes toward a Well-Played Game"
- Randels and Beal, "What makes a man?: religion, sport and negotiating masculine identity in the Promise Keepers," in *With God on Their Side*
- <http://cms.intervarsity.org/studentsoul/item/jeremy-lin>
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## November 3 - November 9

Week VII Gender, Sports, and Religion (11/3-5)

### Monday

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- Goldenberg, Natalie, "From Hopscotch to Hockey Sticks"
- Novak, "Of Women and Sports"

### Weds

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- Linda J. Borish, "Women, sport, and American Jewish identity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries," in *With God on Their Side*
- Putney, "Muscular Women" in *Muscular Christianity*

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## November 10 - November 16

Week IX Self and Team Cultivation: The Pursuit of Excellence (11/10-11/12)

- Phil Jackson, *Sacred Hoops*

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## November 17 - November 23

Week X Spectacles of Sport: Capitalism, and Religion (11/17-19)

### Monday

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- Debord, "The Society of Spectacle" (Paris: 1967): <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/debord/society.htm>
- Kellner, "Media Culture and the Triumph of Spectacle,"

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Weds

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- Kellner, "The Sports Spectacle, Michael Jordan, and Nike: Unholy Alliance"
  - David Andrews, "Disneyization, Debord, and the Integrated NBA Spectacle" *Social Semiotics*, Vol. 16, No. 1, April 2006
  - "Reading Football: How the Popular Press Created the American Spectacle" (UNC Press)
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## November 24 - November 30

Week XI Olympics (11/24)

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- Louis Ruprhect, "The Ethos of Olympism: The Religious Meaning of the Modern Olympic Movement," *Soundings*
  - John MacAloon, "Double Visions: Olympic Games and American Culture" in *The Kenyon Review*, New Series, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Winter, 1982)
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11/26: Paper Due @ 5pm / Class Canceled

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## December 1 - December 7

Week XII Sport and Self Cultivation (12/1 12/3)

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- Gallwey, *The Inner Game of Tennis* (New York: Random House 1974, 2006)
  - Ueshiba, *The Art of Peace*: Read all 114 aphorisms.
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## December 8 - December 14

Week XIII Final Critique (12/8)

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- Novak: "In Sports We (Should Not) Trust: Some Burkean Reforms"
  - Ingrid Kummels, "Anthropological Perspectives on Sport and Culture"
  - Scott Kretchmar, "Why Dichotomies Make it Difficult to See Games as Gifts of God"
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