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# Re-conceptualizing Sport as a Sacred Phenomenon

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## **Abstract**

Sociological studies of sport have established their subject matter as significant to a wide range of socio-cultural concerns. Despite a broad consensus about its global importance, however, the reasons for the particular, even ‘extraordinary’, societal importance of sport today remain deeply contested. Most studies account for it by highlighting its entanglement within a range of secular phenomena including state building, rationalization, bio-political regulation, and the ‘controlled-decontrolling’ of bodies and affects. Occupying a more marginal position within the discipline, others focus on the religious or quasi-religious characteristics of sport. Our paper suggests that neither of these positions, on their own, is best placed to capture the nature and implications of sport’s particular centrality to social life. Proposing a new theoretical approach to the subject that places competing conceptions of what we refer to as the ‘sporting sacred’ at the centre of discussion, we outline, via a re-conceptualization of the writings of two major classical theorists, Durkheim and Weber, a number of contrasting modalities through which sport is prized within contemporary society. These modalities, which embrace both secular and religious phenomena, can, we suggest, provide new insight into the divergent paths along which sports are being ‘pulled’ and steered in the modern era.

**Keywords:** Sport, Modalities of the Sacred, Religion, Durkheim, Weber.

## **Introduction**

Sociological studies of sport have, during the last two decades, established their subject matter as central to a wide range of social and cultural, disciplinary and interdisciplinary, concerns. While Bourdieu was, in the 1980s, able to refer to the analysis of sport as ‘doubly dominated’ - in being marginal to sociology’s mainstream and resisted by its practitioners (Bourdieu, 1987) – the subsequent proliferation of debates and studies on the subject

identified sporting activities and competitions as a useful and often particularly revealing medium through which to explore the conjunction of ‘public issues’ and ‘private troubles’ that have exercised the discipline since its inception (Mills, 2000 [1959]).<sup>1</sup>

Sport may still not enjoy the status accorded to more traditional subjects within the sociological canon (Nisbet, 1993; Levine, 1995), but the briefest glance at recent publications reveals the remarkable academic scope of this area. Studying sport involves matters of globalization and cultural syncretism (Giulanotti and Robertson, 2007; Maguire and Falcous, 2010), state building, social control and democracy (Bairner, 2001; Atkinson and Young, 2008; Eichberg, 2012), mega-events, new media and urban development (Horne and Manzenreiter, 2006), and civilization processes (Dunning, Malcolm and Waddington, 2006). In addition, sport has been analyzed as shaped by, and constitutive of, gender and sexuality (Messner, 2007; Chawansky and Francombe, 2011; Hargreaves and Anderson, 2013), race, racism and ethnicity (Hylton, 2008; Carrington, 2010), and embodiment, health and dis/ability (Shilling, 2008: 44-63; Purdue and Howe, 2012).

These examples provide but a sample of the academic reach of sport; a reach that extended over the last decade into such areas as militarism, nationalism and post-9/11 cultural politics (Atkinson and Young, 2012; Silk, 2012; Weedon, 2012), and exhibited a growing concern with drugs, surveillance and bio-politics (Cole et al., 2004; Sluggett, 2011). Such studies have situated sport at the centre of secular socio-economic practices, including the internationalization of ethical standards (e.g. in the criteria that determine which country hosts the Olympics), revealing how sport involves competition not only for athletic supremacy but also for ‘global civil legitimacy’ (Rowe, 2012: 291). They also demonstrate that far from being a bounded activity entering into discrete and limited interactions with other differentiated sectors of society, sport and sporting issues are inextricably entangled within, and emerge as part of their co-determining intra-actions with, the cultural and social forms that surround them (Barad, 2007).

The extensive nature of such entanglements goes some way towards accounting for the societal importance of sport. One area marginalized in most of these studies, however, is

religion. Important analyses of sport and religion, and various aspects of their relationships, exist (e.g. Hoffman, 2007; Overman, 2011; Watson and Parker, 2012), but these tend to occupy a discrete corner in sports studies.<sup>2</sup> Away from this sequestered space, sociologists who focus on sport's secular impact often view religious adherence as a remnant of traditional practices. More frequently, they ignore religion altogether. The former stance characterizes Guttman's (2004) identification of seven features of modern sport that evidence a definitive break from its previous links with religion, and Overman's (2011: 16) thesis that American sport's ethos is a capitalist 'derivative of *secularized* Protestant values'. Both stances feature in figurational sociology. Dunning (1999) transforms what others treat as the religious consequences of sporting effervescence into the secular 'controlled-decontrolling of emotions'. Maguire (2011), in contrast, neglects religion altogether when identifying future directions for studying globalization and sport.

Such focus upon sport's secular importance is perhaps unsurprising given the frequent acceptance of dualist *Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft* assumptions that underpin many sociological accounts of historical change (Mellor and Shilling, 1997: 13-14). These suggest that religion, sport and society used to permeate each other and were inseparable in pre-modern times.<sup>3</sup> In the contemporary era, however, they identify a global trend, manifest in nationally 'glocalizing' forms (Beyer, 2007: 110), for societies to be differentiated into semi-autonomous spheres in which the political, religious, sporting, etc., possess their own rationality (Mouzelis, 2012). Within this context, it is no longer seen as feasible to posit close associations between sport and religion (cf. Novak, 1976; Prebish, 1993: 62). Instead, religion is assumed to occupy a specific institutional space, constraining its capacity to structure other spheres, including the sporting (Demerath, 2007).

This concern with social differentiation features in other writings that warn us against conflating sport with religiosity. Chandler (1992) and Hervieu-Leger (2000) emphasize this in arguing that sport is unconcerned with fundamental questions of life and death. Higgs and Braswell (2004) employ Otto's 'irreducible holy' in highlighting differences between sport and religion, while Hoffman (1992b) associates sporting and religious rituals with contrasting

phenomenological experiences. For these writers, 'Sport is not a religion' (Chandler, 1992). It is also important to note that singular definitions of 'religion' used in exploring the religious dimensions of sport tend to depend on Christianity, often misrepresenting other forms (Magdalinski and Chandler, 2002).

Irrespective of these reservations, however, there are two major reasons why analyzing sport purely as a secular phenomenon, and marginalizing its religious significance, is potentially antagonistic to a broader attempt to grasp its societal importance. First, just as we have already noted how sport cannot be confined to one particular social sphere subject to discrete and limited interactions with other differentiated sectors of society, so too the global resurgence of religious practice since the latter decades of the twentieth century has affected international relations, national politics and policies, and cultural identities *across* society (Berger, 1999; Thomas, 2005). Religion has become an increasingly important cultural and material force; a force that is intertwined with the various sites, places and media through which sports are produced, enacted and consumed (Eitzen and Sage, 2008; Coakley, 2009; Magdalinski and Chandler, 2002: 2, 15).<sup>4</sup> In this context, while mainstream writings on sport may marginalize the subject, those concerned specifically with religion are demonstrating its importance for a range of sporting issues. Building on the work of Mangan (1986) and others, these include the historical significance of Christianity for rationalized sports and masculinities (Watson et al., 2005; Parker and Weir, 2012), the interconnections between Islam, physical education and the construction of gender (Faroog and Parker, 2009), the problems confronting multi-religious societies keen to raise the profile of sports for women irrespective of their religious affiliation (Walseth and Fasting, 2003; Kay, 2006; Walseth, 2006), and the importance of understanding the significance of religion for national sporting cultures (Price, 2006; Bain-Selbo, 2009).

Second, when neglecting religion, sociological studies of sport also frequently ignore cognate issues about how people treat aspects of their lives as *sacred*. Here, while such phenomena may be explicitly secular, in the sense that they have no direct or indirect connection to religious commitments or communities, they nonetheless suggest elements of

life set apart from the profane or mundane dimensions of workaday existence; elements evident in the fact that many people experience sporting ‘communion’, ‘pilgrimages’ and ‘sacrifices’ as extra-ordinarily important (Hoffman, 1992b: 2; Price, 2000; Magdalinski and Chandler, 2002; Baker, 2007:1). Organized around positive and negative cults, with competitions and contests constituting media for group-binding effervescence (Hoffman, 1992a; Price, 2001; 2006; Edge, 2007: 162), stadia are from this perspective seen as ‘ersatz cathedrals’, and athletes ‘modern deities’ (Magdalinski and Chandler, 2002). Within these circumstances sport can become a transmitter of folk or civil religion (Bellah, 1967; Hammond, 1968; Mathisen, 1992); representing values, containing symbols, and stimulating emotions that consolidate the society to which it belongs (Magdalinski, 2007).

Just as studies focused purely on the secular dimensions of sport can be unhelpfully narrow, however, analyses of its religious and sacred aspects can conflate these two phenomena, as well as neglecting the degree to which secular rather than religious factors can have pre-eminent significance in key contexts. Consequently, in this paper we seek to develop a novel theoretical account of sport’s centrality to social life, attentive to its secular, religious and sacred aspects, by re-conceptualizing the writings of two major classical figures. Durkheim and Weber are interpreted ordinarily as representing alternative sides of the debate regarding whether either religion or the sacred persists or has been rationalized and eliminated in the collective representations, ritual displays and binding effervescences associated with sport (Goodger and Goodger, 1989; King, 2002, 2003; cf. Overman, 1997; 2011; Guttman, 2004). Weber's (1991) study of religion’s diminution under the impact of rationalization has inspired those concerned with the links between Puritanism and the ‘iron cage’ of sporting organization and ascetic training regimes in and beyond the West (Overman, 1997; 2011; Guttman, 2004; Giullianotte, 2004). Analysts who emphasize the overtly religious or sacred characteristics of sport, in contrast, find greater utility in Durkheim’s (1995) identification of the foundational societal significance of the sacred. What is important here about sporting rites, effervescence and totemic representations is that they reflect and create moral orders (Cole, 1975; Goodger, 1985; Higgs, 1996; Light and Kinnaird, 2002).

Arguing against this polarization, we focus on convergences in, as well as the differences between, the writings of Durkheim and Weber, and suggest that these identify them as co-contributors to a new understanding of the contrasting and contested modalities through which sport is prized. This exploration, aided via social theorists who have developed the implications of their work, situates issues associated with variable patterns of sacralization at the heart of our general understanding of sport. In so doing, it enables us to recognize the various ways in which sport has become extraordinary, and to analyze not only the continued influence of religion within sport, but also non-religious elements of sacralization that mean we cannot reduce the 'special' status of sport to specious claims that it is 'religious' (Chandler, 1992). Most broadly, it provides fresh insight into the divergent paths along which sports are being steered in the modern era, and some of the competing forces that are exerting this influence, that should be of concern to anyone interested in the current character and future potentialities of sport.

### **Durkheim and Weber Redux: Contrasting Modalities of the Sporting Sacred**

Durkheim and Weber have been important to the sociology of sport, with analyses informed by one or other of them developing in very different directions. While framing discussions of the secularization or continued religious dimensions of sport through a polarization of their writings remains common, however, it is flawed. This is because Durkheim and Weber understand religion, and people's engagements with the sacred, in *related*, if distinct, ways, rendering questionable juxtapositions of them as opposites. It is also because analyses of sport reveal issues central to each of their writings. Despite his commitment to viewing sport through a Weberian perspective focused upon Protestantism, for example, Overman (2011: 232) acknowledges features of competition that resonate with Durkheim's explorations of ritual celebrations, yet these remain 'residual categories' unexplained by his positively defined framework. Overman's study, indeed, raises important issues for the sociology of sport by asking what status we should attribute sporting practices that are of extraordinary importance to many people, and to non-sporting activities such as business, yet no longer

possess overtly religious properties. Is the alternative to retain some notion of the religious values that persist, albeit in secular form, in sport's standing, or to accept that its rationalization has resulted in wholesale disenchantment?

In what follows, we suggest it is possible and productive to avoid such alternatives by highlighting *competing* conceptions of sport's sacred status through an exploration of the complementarities, as well as the divergences, between Weber and Durkheim. This focus on what we term *modalities of the sporting sacred* removes discussion from the binary oppositions that often frame deliberations about whether sport is religious. It also enables us to avoid associating the sacred exclusively with either 'the transcendent' or with non-religious valuations of sport (see Hoffman, 1992b: 6; Higgs and Braswell, 2004).<sup>5</sup> Before focusing on these modalities, however, it is necessary for us to examine how Weber and Durkheim provide grounding for them by highlighting important *convergences* in their work before specifying two key features of their analyses that diverge from each other. This method enables us to justify our depiction of sport as sacred, illustrating what is shared by the four modalities we focus on, while also identifying two axes along which they differ, and is the reason we are enframing our analysis in both of their writings.

To begin with, Durkheim and also Weber justify recognizing within society certain phenomena, such as sport, that can validly be considered sacred as a result of their distinctive and extraordinary status.<sup>6</sup> Durkheim (1973; 1995) is known for insisting there are things considered sacred, 'set apart' from egoistic organic life, accessed through 'positive' and 'negative' rites; qualities applied regularly to the organization of sport (Edge, 2007). Weber (1968: 789-90, 818-28; 1991 [1915a]: 328) adopts a comparable approach by exploring 'the sacred', and using associated terms including 'enchantment' and 'charisma', to indicate distance between the extraordinary and ordinary (Weber, 1968: 1111-57; 1991 [1919b]: 155); a distance from the mundane often seen as characteristic of sports (Prebish, 1993).

Having legitimized making sacred phenomena such as sport central to sociology, Durkheim and Weber also converge in arguing that the distance from the ordinary occupied by this category of things enables them to shape or '*steer*' the societies in which they are

located through the impact they have on people's *embodied thoughts* and *habits*. This is despite the methodological differences that separate them. Durkheim's (1982) methodological holism sought to institute an absolute demarcation between sociology and psychology, and eschewed hermeneutics in its attempt to provide an objective account of social facts that existed independently of people's knowledge of them. Nevertheless, his writings also emphasized that sacred social facts are *internalised* in the bodies of the social group (Durkheim, 1952: 57). During collective assemblies, including sporting events, these manifestations of the extraordinary arouse in participants 'passionate energies' which shape and restructure individuals' interior experiences and thoughts in line with their symbolism (Durkheim, 1973: 159-63; 1995: 138, 212-3; Goodger and Goodger, 1989).

Weber's (1949) methodological individualism, in contrast, involved a commitment to the empathetic demands of *verstehen* and was bound up with the problems generated by the value-bound researcher and the need to construct ideal types as constructs that simplify, select and accentuate what is of most importance about a phenomenon, even though these are not to be found in their totality within reality (Bruun, 2001). Nevertheless, he also recognizes that extraordinary phenomena can be conceptualized as directing society by influencing the practical techniques through which bodies are trained, adjusting the '*psycho-physical apparatus*' of humans (Weber, 1968: 1156; Maley, 2004: 75-9). In the case of religion, such adjustments enable individuals to achieve distance from, and form critical perspectives on, mundane realities (see Mellor and Shilling, 2010), but the capacities developed through sports training/competition also equip individuals with a 'body schema' and 'secondary consciousness' that transforms their relationship with and orientation to the ordinary world (Merleau-Ponty, 1965: 168-9; Hilton, 2003). Taken together, then, Durkheim and Weber enable us to recognize that modalities of the sporting sacred can help steer the societies in which they are located as a result of their embodied consequences.<sup>7</sup>

The above constitute important convergences between Durkheim and Weber and, despite their use of contrasting terminology and methodologies, justify us depicting them both as theorists of the sacred who provide a foundation on which we can legitimize the idea of,

and identify what is common to, the modalities of the sporting sacred in our analysis.<sup>8</sup> Having noted these commonalities, however, it is the *internal variations* within their writings, and the *contrasts* between them, that enable us to identify two axes on which these modalities differ.

The variations internal to their work concern the judgments they make regarding whether the sacred possesses strong or weak *other-worldly* dimensions. Weber (1991 [1904-05]) associated the sacred beliefs and biblical text of Puritanism with a strong *transcendental* orientation, but viewed as bereft of other-worldly orientations the extraordinary forces of rationalization and bureaucratization consecrated as sacred within modern law and governance (forces identified subsequently as extending into the realm of bio-politics [Agamben, 1998]). Similarly, while Durkheim (1995) viewed *Gemeinschaft* societies as sacred *socio-religious* phenomena, permeated by strong other-worldly elements (other-worldly in that they transport individuals from natural organic existence to a *supernatural* social and moral existence), he identifies the rapidly advancing division of labour as fracturing and secularizing these sacred phenomena (Durkheim, 1952; 1984). Thus, both Weber's and Durkheim's visions of modernity's development encompass within them the implication that while sport may once have been associated with a sphere that lifted people out of their mundane/natural existence, it has now been absorbed, wholly or significantly, into the parameters of this-worldly matters.

If the internal variations in Durkheim's and Weber's writings provide the basis for distinguishing modalities of the (sporting) sacred according to whether they possess strong or weak/non-existent polarities of other-worldliness, an important contrast between their theories enables us to identify another axis, involving *social differentiation*, along which they vary. Even though Durkheim and Weber both suggest sacred phenomena help steer embodied social life, they disagree about the trajectories this involves. Weber (1991 [1904-05]) suggests the individualising habits of Protestantism culminated in the absence of community from modern economies. While this results in a proliferation of life-spheres, each are subject subsequently to what can be seen as the *de-differentiating* impact of rationalization and bureaucracy (Crook et al, 1992): *extraordinary forces* that operate across *all* sections of the



Derived from this analysis, we suggest Durkheim presents us with a conception of 1) the *socio-religious sacred* wherein sport is viewed as extraordinary through representations sanctifying it as possessing strong other-worldly dimensions, and through a collective effervescence that lifts people from the egoistic dimensions of their homo duplex existence and joins them within the supernatural realm that is society (Durkheim, 1973). Sport and society are both other-worldly oriented and weakly differentiated in so far as they constitute part of the same socio-religious entity. Durkheim's (1952; 1984) analysis of an advancing division of labour and the fracturing of the societally pervasive sacred, however, also allows us to identify 2) a *secular sacred*; a situation in which sport or *anything* can be 'set apart' from, and responded to emotionally as 'special' in relation to, mundane life, *without* being associated with an other-worldly sphere and within a *highly differentiated* division of labour wherein it has no necessary link to or effect on whole societies.

Weber, in turn, is best known for his analysis of Protestantism containing a conception of 3) the *transcendent sacred*, characterised by a realm existing *above* and *outside* society. In this context, sport and other phenomena are viewed as secular, conducive to the *advance of social differentiation*, yet also as potential media for *other-worldly* experience. However, Weber's focus on technological domination and rationally managed life also provides space for viewing the sacred as reduced to what Agamben (1998) refers to as *bare life*; 4) a minimalist *bio-political* sacred form, immersed within this-worldly matters, consistent with a governmentality that *de-differentiates* modes of regulation by viewing the complexities of sport and all social phenomena in terms of their implications for the productive possibilities within physical existence (Weber, 1968: 24-5, 1156). Sport remains important societally, but its main function lies in adjusting the embodied dispositions of individuals 'to the demands of...the tools, the machines' (Maley, 2004: 75, 9; Weber, 1968: 1156; 1991 [1919b]: 149).<sup>10</sup>

In developing and explicating these modalities, is not our intention to suggest that the perceptions and experiences of sport as extraordinary they reveal are unchanging, or that the

construction of sport as sacred is disassociated from the fluctuating interdependencies of embodied subjects. Nevertheless, their use does enable us to clarify what is at stake in the contested conceptions that exist of sport's extraordinary status. In what follows, we focus initially on the two modalities characterised by strong other-worldly dimensions (the transcendent sporting sacred and the socio-religious sporting sacred) before examining the two that resonate more with mainstream sociology of sport's concern with secular and bio-political concerns.

### **The Socio-Religious Sporting Sacred**

The first modality of the sporting sacred is characterized by a strong other-worldly dimension, but exists in a societal context marked by low levels of social differentiation. It can be derived from the correlation Durkheim makes between society, religion and the sacred; a correlation conceptualized in terms of a socio-religious sacred wherein society and everything valued within it (including sport) is inherently religious. This imparts a strong other-worldly layering to social and sporting life (in line with Durkheim's [1973] view that society as a sacred force propels humans into a dimension of moral/religious existence radically other to organic life); a layering enabling individuals to perceive and experience as religious 'the society of which they are members and the obscure yet intimate relations they have with it' (Durkheim, 1995: 227). Enveloping people within this milieu, the socio-religious sacred also presupposes weak levels of social differentiation: as Lukes (1973) notes, without exception *all* institutions, knowledge and activities either positively embolden religious society, or constitute profaning threats to it.

In this context, the socio-religious sporting sacred is generated when individuals gather to watch/participate in athletic competitions alongside totemic representations that symbolize the group to which they belong, and become 'swept up' by a collectively generated effervescence attaching them to these socio-religious symbols and setting them against any opposition that threatens defeat. These occasions consolidate the sense individuals have of themselves as *social*, dispelling anomie, through sporting rituals that stimulate group

emotions by managing (through positive and negative cults) people's contact with the sacred (Goodger and Goodger, 1989; Martin-Barbero, 1997). Reenergized in their commitment to those norms and symbols deployed in these gatherings, socially sacred sport stimulates individuals to perceive and worship their society as religious.

This conception of the socio-religious sporting sacred is evident in the idea that sports are integral to a civil religion that, as Bellah (1967) explains, generates symbols and celebrations that sacralize society as the guardian of morality (Mathisen, 1992; Ladd and Mathisen, 1999). Sport here provides no transcendent *escape* from society, but a worship of the group's existence and values (Magdalinski, 2007; Forney, 2010). Interpretations of baseball, basketball and gridiron as a 'national faith' in the USA, for example, support this view of the socio-religious sporting sacred (Price, 1992; Ladd and Mathisen, 1999; Butterworth, 2010; Forney, 2010), while Zurcher's and Meadows's (1967) account of Mexican bullfighting and USA baseball deepens this analysis in suggesting that positive rites enable spectators to discharge potentially profaning energies generated by other aspects of life and re-attach themselves to society. Foster's and Woodthorpe's (2012) analysis of the increasingly common acts of remembrance at UK football matches suggests another way sport can be part of a wider socio-religious sacred, with matters of death, as well as life, permeating sport via commemorative rites that unite people against the profaning threat of social loss.

These examples minimise the socio-religious sporting sacred's connections to institutional religion, but this is not a necessary feature of this modality. In the US, sport has at times been viewed as an expression of a Christian social order and as part of a wider attempt to consecrate as religious the whole of society. This is evident in Newman's and Giardina's (2011: 119-20) analysis of the pervasive exhibition of a Christian 'religious order' across all aspects of the NASCAR sporting spectacle, (see also Clarke, 2008; Butterworth, 2010; Silk, 2012), while Brown (2006) provides a provocative analysis of the wider political conditions in which this socio-religious modality of the sporting sacred has been forged. While the political force of neoconservatism in the US may draw on incompatible strands,

and exists in an uneasy relationship with neo-liberalist economics, it often seeks to model ‘state authority on church authority’ and to recruit all of society to this moral and religious project (Brown, 2006: 706).

Connections between the socio-religious sacred and institutional religion do not stop with Christianity. Indeed, the case of Islam – with *sharia* law viewing society and sport not as secular, but inherently religious, a ‘timeless manifestation’ of God’s will, subject ‘neither to history nor circumstance’ (Ruthven, 1997: 73) – provides us with a religion that appears to be eminently suited to categorising and treating sport as inherently socio-religious. From the perspective of *sharia*, sports constitute avenues through which religious identities should be maintained and developed (e.g. Nauright and Magdalinski, 2002).

A central feature of this modality of the socio-religious sporting sacred is its capacity to enframe as extraordinary sporting and other phenomena that might otherwise be viewed as secular; a characteristic that extends for Durkheim (1995: 114, 125, 138, 233-4) in its *naturalization*, via the incorporation of collective symbols and mythologies, within the body (Shilling, 2005b: 114). The sense across various religions that blood and hair, for example, possess holy qualities is evidence for Durkheim (1995: 228-9) of a ‘diffusion’ of the socio-religious sacred into human bodies, making them ‘naturally’ religious. Continuing with the example of Islam, this can be seen as reflected in the lives of Muslims for whom sport constitutes an expression of the religious injunction to maintain the body’s health, purity and modesty (Walseth and Fasting, 2003). Thus, the hijab serves for many (not all) Muslim women as a means of demonstrating religion’s importance to sport, as in other areas of social life; an emphasis that has become what Harkness and Islam (2011) term a ‘cranial combat zone’ in the issue of (religious) dress in sport.<sup>11</sup>

Predicated upon weak levels of social differentiation, and a strong sense that society is layered by other-worldly considerations, the socio-religious sporting sacred is likely to be associated with conflict when competing modalities co-exist within a societal space or when it confronts other approaches towards sport. Such situations are increasingly common, as evident in Silverstein’s (2002) analysis of sport and Islam in France, by the controversy

caused by team names in a Californian Muslim football league (e.g. ‘Soldiers of Islam’ and ‘Mujahideen’), and in analyses suggesting that sport in the West ‘correlates unevenly with Islamic beliefs and codes of behaviour’, excluding those who would utilize it as an extension of Islamic faith (Baker, 2007: 218; Burdsey, 2010). Tension is also apparent when prominent Muslim sportspeople in the UK, such as the boxer Amir Khan, receive exceptional scrutiny on the basis of concerns about ‘Muslims-as-terrorists’ and the capacity of Muslims to adapt to the implicitly Christian ‘British way of life’ (Burdsey 2007; Malcolm et al, 2010). As Magdalinski and Chandler (2002: 5) note, lacking in most accounts of religion and sport is the recognition that the colonization of sport by religious groups can constitute ‘a divisive mechanism’, yet this modality of the socio-religious sporting sacred can help us understand why conflicts occur.

### **The Transcendent Sporting Sacred**

The transcendent sacred also has a strong sense of sport’s other-worldly capacities, but, in contrast to the socio-religious sacred, recognizes sport exists within a secular sphere characterized by significant levels of socially differentiation in which religion’s reach is limited. Sport can provide a *potential* route to other-worldly experience, but its transcendent aspects are *contingent*; manifesting themselves when people’s engagement in secular sports happens to ‘lift them’ out of mundane life. While this Weberian conception of the transcendent sporting sacred contains contingency at its centre, it illuminates important features of one major valuation of sport’s status.

The transcendent sporting sacred is not associated exclusively with a single religion, or indeed with institutional religion, but Taylor (2007) highlights the significance of ‘transcendence’ in Buddhism, Taoism and Hinduism, and this extends to the importance they attribute to certain sports/exercise. Jackson and Csikzentmihalyi (1999:123) explain the transcendence accessible in Taoist philosophy through Tai Chi Chuan, for example, arguing that this ‘flow’ resembles states of ecstasy important to various religious disciplines (see James, 1982 [1902]; Jennings et al, 2010). Jackson and Csikzentmihalyi (1999) and Murphy

and White (1995) also suggest that athletes experience this transcendence more widely. At these levels of intensity - by no means common, and often occurring only after years of practice - concentration achieves a pure spiritual dimension in which there is a transcendence of the body whose efforts first made it possible (Higdon 1992:80; Sheehan, 1992: 84-5; Ravizza, 1984; Murphy and White, 1995).

While the experience of the transcendent sporting sacred can be illustrated by discussions of Eastern spiritualities, it is not confined to them. Numerato (2009: 444-5) examines how sailing in communist Czechoslovakia provided an enchanting 'escape from everyday reality' that lifted people out of their oppressive workaday environments. Wacquant's (2004) groundbreaking carnal ethnography of boxing demonstrates how its corporeal disciplines can result in transcendent experiences and altered lifestyles for dedicated participants. More generally, Christianity has always situated paramount religious reality in the transcendent space of the next world (Martin, 2011), possessing a long tradition of recognizing that while sport is a secular and often morally questionable, it can be a route to transcendent experience.

In Christianity, the sporting route to transcendent experience is usually indirect - bringing individuals closer to Christ by disciplining the body - but involves occasionally direct intimations of God's majesty. Either way, sport is a potential resource helping individuals be *called out* of the world (John 15: 19) through changing their bodies. One early statement of this approach is in 1 Corinthians (9: 24-27) where Paul, visiting during the Isthmian Games, urges people to adopt 'a new seriousness and focus in their Christian life.' He argues that this focus can be aided by athletic training that brings the body under 'complete control' and does not result in participants surrendering to secular temptations of 'excessive competitive spirit' and 'perishable' triumphs (ibid.; see also Brock, 2012: 5, 16).

This Christian ambivalence towards sport developed through centuries of engagement with its secular excesses and partial incorporation into religious festivals. Early Christianity defined itself in opposition to broader cultural milieu, and the bloody spectacles of Roman games were criticized. Later, in the Middle-Ages, while jousting tournaments were

condemned by Christian leaders, village sports were 'integral' to church life (Henderson, 2001). The focus on sport's potentially undesirable secular characteristics intensified with the rise of Puritanism, a doctrine that designated as sinful this-worldly bodily pleasures (Weber, 1991 [1904-05]; Brailsford, 1984; Jable, 1976; Baker, 2007). Puritanism was not wholly opposed to sport, however, although Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin recognized emphasized the role of recreation above that of sport in the education and disciplining of Christian youth (Baker, 2007; Overman, 2011: 32). This significance of sport within Christianity was strengthened in succeeding centuries by a whole series of measures including, but not confined to, Protestant's support of 'muscular Christianity' within UK private schools (as a way of contributing to the fitness and missionary capacities of future leaders); its endorsement of initiatives to reduce ungodly behavior among the working classes (Struna, 1977; Holt, 1989); and the specific promotion of Church affiliated sports teams in the USA and UK (Mangan, 1984, 1986; Mangan and Walvan, 1987; Baker, 2007; Overman, 2011; Parker and Weir, 2012).

Despite Christian ambivalence towards sport, physical activity remains important to a religion centered on bodily transcendence and rebirth. This is exemplified by Coleman's (2000) analysis of the physical imagery employed by charismatic Christianity, and Hoffman's (2007: 121) observation of past muscular routes to Christianity. Christianity has not, however, enjoyed a problem-free relationship with the transcendent sporting sacred (promoting sport as a means to religious ends, while criticising its morally suspect elements). Two factors are particularly important here. Firstly, sectarian disagreements about doctrines of transcendence have been reflected in rugby, football, and other sports, informing the intense conflict that exists, for example, between Celtic and Rangers football clubs (Murray, 1997; Bairner, 2001; Chandler, 2002; Kelly, 2011). Second, while Christianity's acceptance of a secular, socially differentiated realm facilitated tolerance towards sports, judging them on their moral merits, it facilitated the development in the West of an increasingly influential non-religious sporting realm (this acceptance of the secular led Berger [1967] to depict Christianity as 'its own gravedigger'). The Christian tolerance of a secular sphere, indeed, can be viewed as creating

space for the increasing influence of rationalism, commercialism and a secular nationalism in the enframing of sporting experience; an enframing featuring prominently in our third modality of the sporting sacred.

### **The Sporting Secular Sacred**

Durkheim is best known for analyzing the socio-religious sacred, in which society, religion and the sacred are inseparable. Nevertheless, his writings on the fracturing of the sacred in modernity have been utilized to suggest that the sacred can be sport or *anything* individuals view as extraordinary despite such phenomena possessing neither a strong other-worldly dimension nor being located within a religious re-creation of society (Featherstone, 1991; Ferguson, 1992). This modality is most accurately referred to as the *secular sacred*: while it contrasts with the transcendental sporting sacred in being removed from any strong sense of an other-worldly realm, it shares with it a recognition and acceptance of the differentiated characteristics of society. This secular sacred is, indeed, suited perfectly to societies characterized by historically high levels of social differentiation and possessed of no single or general focus of collective attention. Applied to sport, the secular sacred enables us to accept that competitive games can occupy an extraordinary place in individuals' lives within non-religious groups and societies; a modality revealing the *personalization* of the sacred (Luckmann, 1967; Bellah et al., 1985).

The idea that sport constitutes a *secular* form of the sacred may seem counter-intuitive, but such phenomena have been identified within the 'anthropology of secularism' as competing with religious forms (Asad, 2003; Navaro-Yashin, 2002; Özyürek, 2006). For sport to assume this status, however, requires that society is no longer enframed by the strong senses of other-worldliness associated with the transcendent-sacred or the socio-religious sacred: the secular sporting sacred is dependent upon individuals and groups being able to valorize phenomena *in their own right, outside* religious contexts. Such conditions may make it easier for sport to emerge as a prominent object of adulation, appearing for some to replace religion in their lives, but the absence of strong other-worldly religious dimensions (integral

to the reach and ordering capacities of the socio-religious sporting sacred in particular), raises questions about its *socially integrative* potentialities and its *experiential pervasiveness* within society (Lynch, 2012: 26-7).

In terms of its *integrative potentialities*, if any sport can be experienced as special irrespective of the values embedded in its organization and practice, it is not surprising if the secular sporting sacred fails to exert any *enduring* impact on social solidarity. Viewed from this perspective, while Olympic games, world championships, and cup finals may prompt excitement, their location outside any significant cosmology means there is less possibility for people to be united by conceptions of what is sacred to a group *as a whole* (Wickström and Illman, 2012). In discussing sports ‘mega-events’, for example, Horne and Manzenreiter (2006) and Giulianotti and Robertson (2012) recognize celebratory aspects to these occasions, but provide no grounds to suggest that any ‘imagined’ national or global community they evoke exerts enduring effects on the collective conscience.

In terms of the *pervasiveness* with which sport is actually *experienced* as a form of the secular sacred within society, it is important to note that in contrast to Durkheim’s suggestion that the socio-religious sacred operates via the incorporation of *collectively mediated* religious phenomena through the body, the construction of the secular sacred depends on potentially transient *personal preferences*. As Dunning (1999: 1) argues, however, if sport is a matter of personal preference, few activities have ‘served so regularly as foci of simultaneous common interest and concern to so many people’. Sport may be secular and commercialised, but it is also remarkably popular: in 2005, Americans alone spent over \$89 billion on sports goods, for example, while over 7.6 billion admission tickets were sold to sports events (Hoffman, 2007: 2-3). If the attractions of sport are so pervasive, furthermore, should the above comments about its integrative capacities be qualified?

In developing further discussion of sport’s integrative qualities and experiential pervasiveness, two contrasting assessments of its potentialities are useful. In a positive assessment, Maffesoli’s (1996) neo-Durkheimian analysis heralds a return of the secular sacred in the emergence of a widespread emotionally constituted tribalism held to mark the

end of rationalism and individualism, evident within sports arenas and other locales, enabling people to ‘keep warm’ against the ‘winds’ of modernity (Maffesoli, 1996: 9, 32-3). This account has become popular among those who draw on James (1982 [1902]), as well as Maffesoli, in locating the operationalization of the sacred in *feelings*, signalling parallels with a broader valorisation of affect evident in the social sciences today that implies a contagiousness and imitative quality to sport’s popularity that can indeed join people together within secular society (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010).

Maffesoli’s neo-Durkheimian work is not the only source appraising positively the secular sporting sacred. Figurational sociology contains highly sophisticated explanations of sport’s special status in secular society. Recognising that sports perform some functions undertaken previously by religion, Elias and Dunning (1986: 3) and Dunning (1999: 7, 41) argue that one reason for their popularity is that they enable individuals to exercise physical and emotional capacities via a ‘quest for excitement’ otherwise subjugated in the rationalised environs of work. Sports facilitate this because of their associations with motility, sociability, and mimesis that stimulate a controlled de-controlling of emotional controls that people may want and need in secular, rationalised society.

Negatively assessing sport’s potential, Meštrović (1997) suggests that the developments analyzed by Maffesoli and others evidence an instrumentally rational manipulation of ‘sacred’ emotions for economic/political ends. For Meštrović, the secular sporting sacred is better viewed as a form of *post-emotionalism* which harnesses affects to nationalist, commercial and other ‘illusory’ world-views. The political use of athletes can be traced to the classical Olympics, for example, while sport’s molding of character contributed to Britain’s colonial domination. Later, Hitler used the 1936 Olympics to promote German superiority, while much Cold War conflict and competition took place in sports arenas. More recently, Butterworth (2008), Kelly (2013), Silk (2012) and others examined the co-opting of sport to normalize political militarism and governmental discourses of the ‘war on terror’.

Analysts of militarism, nationalism and post-9/11 cultural politics in the US have in particular highlighted the manipulation of ‘sacred’ emotions for political ends. We have

already used the example of the US in exploring the socio-religious sacred, but it is arguably more common for sport here to be tied to the valuation of conservative values that are irreducible to Christianity, or any other religion, including the promotion a white cultural nationalism (Kusz, 2007; Silk, 2012). This returns us to Brown's (2006) analysis of the divergent political alliances that exist between neoconservatism and neoliberalism in the US. While neoconservatives may seek at times to promote the idea of society, and all that exists within it, as a socio-religious form of the sacred, there also exist more opportunistic attempts to validate sports and other forms of culture as this-worldly sacred phenomena when they serve prevalent political purposes of military-corporate 'power elites', including the scapegoating of those considered unpatriotic (Mills, 1956; Brown, 2006: 703; Silk, 2012: 6). As Butterworth (2008; 2010) argues in his analysis of media coverage of the Super Bowl, and the discourses and practices of baseball, as the United States became defined politically increasingly through identifications with militarism and war, television coverage of nationally prized sports events 'reduced the available means of identifying as "American," mandating that to do so properly is to honor a history of violence and military aggression' (Butterworth, 2008: 322).

These are just a few examples of how the secular sporting sacred can be harnessed to what Durkheim (1961: 77) refers to as a 'centrifugal nationalism' associated with the stimulation of sectarian emotions. They also raise issues regarding sport's involvement in governance and regulation, and this is taken to a deeper level with the final modality of the sporting sacred we explore.

### **The bio-political sporting sacred**

The bio-political sporting sacred shares with the secular sporting sacred a lack of strong other-worldly characteristics, but differs from it in being associated with forces that effect a de-differentiation of society. It can be derived from Weber's (1991; 1991 [1919b]) writings that have at their centre not only the world transforming effects of the transcendent sacred, associated with Protestantism, but also a vision of the bleak specter that followed the

extension of rationality facilitated by the Christian acceptance of the secular sphere. For Weber, these circumstances weaken radically the other-worldly insofar as there is no longer any outside to the 'iron cage' in which people exist, no contact with other-worldliness in sport or elsewhere, and nothing ultimate apart from the power of instrumental rationalism. Far from resulting in a disappearance of the sacred and the endless multiplication of social sectors operating via their specific rationalities, however, the implications of Weber's (1968, 1991; 1991 [1919b]) analyses have been interpreted as helping to identify the bio-political extension of technological culture itself (inside and outside of sport) as the last, exceptionally powerful, incarnation of the extraordinary (Agamben, 1998; Foucault, 2010). This incarnation is associated with a strong de-differentiating effect on societal modes of regulation, moreover, involving detailed control over the human body *across* and *irrespective of* the varied institutions in which people live.<sup>12</sup>

There exist various conceptions of the bio-political: the term can be traced to nineteenth century philosophies of life and twentieth century organic conceptions of the state, with Agamben (1998: 1, 3-12, 80) locating its origins in Ancient Greece. Nevertheless, bio-politics usually serves as a conceptual means of analyzing how the production of life is associated with the organization of death, and displays concern with the productive possibilities of reducing humans to 'bare life'/living organisms rather than active political subjects (Heller, 1996). Its importance has, moreover, increased within a modern era in which the management of bodies is core to 'the mechanisms and calculations of State power' (Agamben, 1998: 3, 4, 111; Foucault, 1979; Rose, 2007).

The de-differentiating impact of this bio-political modality of the sacred reaches across society; from debates about euthanasia, to attempts to monitor/control the weight of children, to the impact of neuroscience on policy (Agamben, 1998; Wastell and White, 2012; Wright and Harwood, 2012). For Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004), indeed, bio-politics constitutes a new stage of capitalism characterized by the collapsing of boundaries between economics and politics, public and the private, while few areas exhibit its influence better than sport. Sport has become an exemplar of the governmental regulation of bodies (Turner,

1984),<sup>13</sup> with the history of sports revealing a disciplining of bodies via a regimented organization of space prioritizing performance over creativity (Eichberg, 1998), and the hosting of major sporting events enabling states to implement extraordinary security measures that can also provide investment opportunities for capital (Lenskyi, 2004; Haggerty and Boyle, 2012: 256; Atkinson and Young, 2012; Giulianotti and Klauser, 2012; Sugden, 2012).

The bio-political sporting sacred is also evident in the control-through-commercialization of athletes' bodies. While the roots of sports sponsorship are not new, there was from the twentieth century increasing recognition of the body's potential to be a location for commercial signs (Schaaff, 1992; Birley, 1993). The growth of industrial league sport in America during the 1920s, for example, capitalized on the value of the sexualized female body, with the glamour of women's bodies continuing to offer proven market value (Emery 1994:114). More generally, Baudrillard (1993: 105-7) discusses how sporting bodies are enveloped in the 'second skin' of sponsors, with corporations stipulating contractually what sports stars should wear and how they should behave. Such control is also focused – via the pervasiveness of adverts in various media for exercise equipment, vitamin supplements, etc., that portray what Featherstone (2010) refers to as an 'affective image' – on stimulating consumers to 'get fit, and get productive' in a manner that harnesses desires, producing 'captivation' (Thrift, 2010). In this context, the sporting body has been seen as the most important factor in what has become the hyper-commercial sporting spectacle (Andrews, 2006).

The bio-political sporting sacred has arguably permeated contemporary life most notoriously in the case of performance enhancing drugs; a phenomenon that recognizes the bio-political concern with the molecular and genetic components of the body. Their present-day state censure - evident in the controversy sparked by Lance Armstrong's admissions and the Australian Crime Commission's uncovering of doping across sporting codes - is paradoxical given the growing pharmaceuticalization of society (Bloor et al, 1988; Williams, et al, 2011; Dumit, 2012). It also contrasts with the alliance between laboratories, athletes and exercise physiologists between the two World Wars that was widely regarded as a legitimate

pursuit of sporting success (Hoberman, 1992; Dimeo, 2006). Nevertheless, the existence of highly trained, drug-free, record-breaking bodies provides a basis on which the general rationalization of the body can be naturalized as the fulfillment of human destiny rather than as a technologically directed imposition. ‘Natural’ athletes stand as highly visible, symbolically charged examples of what can be achieved by individuals who submit their body to a regimented and productive lifestyle (including, for example, careful monitoring of diet and sleeping patterns), to the demands of what is considered legitimate within the bio-political sporting sacred, while the frequency with which ‘natural’ sporting bodies are ‘supplemented’ shows how challenging these demands have become (see Cohen, 2009).

These brief examples of the bio-political sporting sacred can be multiplied, but may be seen as contributing towards what Haggerty and Ericson (2000) refer to as a ‘surveillant assemblage’. In the context of our discussion, there has here occurred a bio-political convergence of what were once discrete surveillance systems wherein bodies are viewed and monitored in terms of properties and capacities that are abstracted from their varied contexts and backgrounds, and re-assembled to reflect and constitute a particular sporting field (e.g. Markula-Denison and Pringle, 2006; Sluggett, 2011). That bodily performances and appearances have become a particularly influential focus of this assemblage in recent years can be seen in the extent to which norms regarding physical capacity and size have spread way beyond sports, to influence the classification of people from sites ranging from schools to homes for the elderly (Evans et al., 2009; Rich, 2010; Rail, 2012). Fit, sporting bodies have here become a material ‘prosthetic for imaginative work’ (Featherstone, 2010: 198) whereby a range of professionals, ranging from sports coaches to health care specialists, are involved in promulgating a series of *body pedagogics* associated with an idealized view of the sporting body (Shilling, 2010).

This bio-political surveillant assemblage illustrates how sport has become central to Heidegger’s (1993) implication that the reduction of humans to bare life positions us as ‘standing reserves’ for technological demands for efficiency (Taylor, 2007). As one ‘iron man’ triathlete commented of his training regime, ‘It’s like being in jail’ (Connell, 1990:

85). In these circumstances, other modalities of the sporting sacred, insofar as they persist, are challenged by the bio-political routines of everyday life (Maley, 2004: 75, 79). As Weber (1968: 1156; 1991 [1919b]: 149) suggests, secularization has reached a stage where it is not simply about the erosion of religious *doctrines*, but the promotion of *technologically* enframed experiences that adjust people's 'psycho-physical apparatus' to the management of bare life (see also Agamben, 1998: 186-7). This argument helps explain Hoffman's (1992b) study of the difficulties athletes face seeking to comprehend their dedication in the context of their Christianity: they are pulled between their religion and the bio-political demands of organized sports. While Christianity teaches them that the body is made in the image of divine creation, possessed of transcendent orientation, sports such as American football appropriate the athlete's body for this-worldly battle and destruction (Hoffman, 2007).

The bio-political sporting sacred contrasts with other modalities of the extraordinary, yet also resonates with and builds upon features of the secular sporting sacred. As the secular became sacralised, and it became clear that anything could be identified as sacred, governments and multi-national corporations devoted increasing resources to scientific and market research seeking to 'reach down' to control the emotions, affects and behaviours of embodied subjects through sporting and other means for purposes of ideology, policy and profitability (Arvidsson, 2005; Lury, 2009). From sports/exercise curricula in schools that import a corporeal metric into the assessment of children's bodies (deployed via physical education that seeks for Bourdieu [1988] to obtain forms of consent from bodies that might otherwise be resisted by minds), to the commercial exploitation of athletes' bodies, the bio-political sporting sacred appears increasingly influential.

### **The contested modalities of sport as sacred**

This paper has explored competing conceptions of sport's extraordinary status in the context of mainstream sociological studies of sport that tend to marginalize its religious/quasi-religious or sacred characteristics. This task is necessary, we suggested, not only as there has been a general resurgence of religion in much of the world, raising issues about the

relationship between religious authorities and secular activities, or because of the parallels that continue to be identified between sport, on the one hand, and worship, belief, rituals, effervescences, ascetic disciplines and icons, on the other, but also because of the divergent forms through which sport's societal significance is embedded within patterns of sacralization. In undertaking this analysis, we re-conceptualized the writings of Durkheim and Weber, suggesting it is possible to develop from them four modalities of the sporting sacred distinguished on the basis of the strength or weakness of their other-worldly qualities and their consequences for social differentiation.

Our theoretical development of these necessarily simplifies the complexities involved in sport's development, but if we accept that the precise form taken by the modalities changes over time, and is always to some degree in flux, they can help us understand the general processes enabling sport to achieve exceptional societal status. In this context, our analysis suggests that in both socio-religious sacred and transcendent sacred forms, the enframing of sport/sporting experience is centred on strongly polarized conceptions of the extraordinary and profane, though with different consequences in terms of whether their cohabitation with the secular is likely to be marked by conflict or accommodation.

The socio-religious sacred is opposed to any secularization of society insofar as this would interfere with its religious consecration of society into sporting and other phenomena that are sacred, or that might threaten profanation or even acknowledge a sphere in which experiences are cosmologically meaningless. This opposition remains relevant and can be seen in the case of increasingly global debates about Muslim identities in sports (Harkness and Islam, 2011). These debates are addressed by Asad's (2003) comments on the difficulties Muslims face in participating in any aspect of the public sphere in the West predicated on the Christian acceptance of a distinction between the (private) religious and the (public) secular, and are complicated by the divergences that sometimes exist between socio-cultural practices in Muslim communities and Islamic teaching in such areas as the status of women. In this context, it is also interesting to see how aspects of sport viewed previously as possessing a weak relationship to the social sacred can – as in the history of Sumo wrestling and its

gradual assimilation to Shintoism in Japan – become incorporated as part of a national religion (Light and Kinnaird, 2002).

In contrast, the transcendent sacred's equation of sport with a this-worldly sphere, that contrasts with an other-worldly realm, presupposes and even valorizes a degree of secularization. What is significant about this is that it promotes interaction with, and accommodation to, other modalities of the sacred. Evangelical Christianity is involved increasingly in the commercialism of American sports as a means of promoting its message, for example, while Catholicism has produced sports merchandising selling images of Jesus 'playing ball' (Hoffman, 2007; Higgs and Braswell, 2004: 13-14). Both examples demonstrate accommodation between the transcendent and secular potentialities of sport (Hoffman, 2007: 171, 221). Interactions such as these have not only imparted religious elements to diet and exercise, though, but are also enframing the meanings of transcendent experience within an increasingly secular sporting sacred framework. As Griffith (2004) argues, the devotion to the body common among American Christian exercise devotees is replacing spiritual indicators of Christian character such as love and forgiveness with this-worldly benefits of thinness and muscularity.

This focus on bodily control indicates how the transcendent sporting sacred can also possess affinities with the bio-political sacred, with what Hoffman (2007: 168) refers to as 'cultus aerobicus', signifying the value Evangelical Christianity places on bodily control *for its own sake*. While the transcendent sacred within Christianity has historically viewed sport and exercise as a secular activity that is also a potential means to an end, it is now frequently an item of faith that 'competitive sport is physically and morally good for human beings', a judgment that comes close to valorizing as sacred an activity that was historically a *means to an end* (Baker, 2007: 253). The bio-political sacred also possesses affinities with, and can be seen as developing in the context of, certain secular sporting sacred values. King, Leonard and Kusz (2007), for example, explore how a white, masculine, cultural nationalism often underpins performative issues in sport, including issues relating to doping, and highlight the

importance of recognizing the racially inflected and gendered character of the bio-political sporting sacred (see also Kusz, 2007; Darnell, 2010).

Sport has long been seen as more than leisure, representing for individuals and groups an activity and spectacle possessed of extraordinary dimensions. Nevertheless, the manners in which sport has been invested with such status, and the precise meanings associated with it, have been subject to change and contestation, varying between societies. Exploring how these modalities of the sporting sacred emerge, circulate, interact, conflict and evolve over time is a vital means of ascertaining the character and consequences of sport's status in the current era. This should be of importance not only to those interested in the religious or quasi-religious status of sport, but to all those interested in sport's social standing as one of the most important cultural phenomena in the current era. Governments, groups, religions, and societies that value sport as being of exceptional importance do so for very different reasons, and are seeking to steer and direct its meanings, experiences and socio-cultural consequences along very different pathways. Recognising the modalities of the sporting sacred involved in these developments should be key to sociological understandings of the politics and policies that are informed by such priorities.

#### **NOTES:**

1. As Giulianotti and Brownwell (2012: 2) note, prior to this period, and despite its centrality to modern life, sport was treated as an insufficiently 'serious' subject for social science scholars (notwithstanding occasional exceptions to this within mainstream sociology, including the writings of Elias and Bourdieu [e.g. Elias and Dunning, 1966; Bourdieu, 1978, 1988]). Recently, in contrast, a growing number of studies have advanced our cultural and sociological understanding by placing themselves in what Denzin (2012: 295) refers to as the 'historical present'. These have acknowledged the significance of the changing landscape of global social relations, including the 'War on Terror', for the intricate connections that exist between sport and such issues as democracy, the media, citizenship, national identity, and the

embodied foundations of individual and social realities that permeate these phenomena and have been central to recent social theory (e.g. Giardina and Newman, 2011; Malcolm, 2011; Andrews and Silk, 2012; Denzin, 2012: 300; Shilling, 2005a,b; 2012).

2. Our argument that mainstream analyses of sport and society have tended to ignore or view as marginal matters pertaining to religion and the sacred, rather than treat these as central to their investigations, does not imply that studies of the relationship between sport and religion are rare. Neither does it suggest that such studies are excluded from the main sub-disciplinary journals, or are missing from research or teaching agendas more generally (e.g. the University of Gloucestershire is home to a Centre for Sport, Spirituality and Religion, while Mercer University Press is home to a sports and religion series). Nevertheless, it does highlight a situation in which major studies in the sociology of sport have been able to discuss and analyze all manner of ‘sport and society’ issues by treating these, explicitly or implicitly, as secular matters, thereby *overlooking the essential importance to their subject matter of religion and/or the sacred*.

3. The ball games of the Mayans and Aztecs, for example, have been regarded as ‘religious sports’, presided over by priests, and associated with human sacrifices (Scarborough and Wilcox, 1991), while the Ancient Olympics were held in honor of gods and state (Harris, 1972; Sansone, 1988).

4. Sport has, for example, been used to promote affiliation to such organizations as the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, the Campus Crusade for Christ, the Young Men’s and Women’s Hebrew Associations, and the Islamic Federation for Women’s Sport (Borish, 1999; Harkness and Islam, 2011).

5. The concept of the sacred has a long history in sociology, religious studies, anthropology and related disciplines. Etymologically traced to conceptions of ‘making holy’, consecrating,

setting apart, belonging to the gods, and sacrifice, sociologists have drawn for inspiration on contrasting sources including Eliade's (1983 [1957]) conception of hierophany (the manifestation of something wholly other in this world, and James's (1982 [1902]) interest in ineffable and noetic experience (experiences which provide insight into exceptional knowledge, yet which cannot be translated into cognitive conceptions). What is essential to all these uses, however, and key to our employment of the term in this paper, is the acceptance that the sacred denotes phenomena that are extraordinary in relation to, and contrast radically with, those aspects of life considered profane or mundane.

6. While Durkheim and Weber are best known for dealing with the significance of extraordinary phenomena in relation to *religion*, it is one of their great accomplishments to have provided a conceptual means for recognizing how matters *outside* the formal structures of institutionalized religion, including personality, eroticism, art and friendship, and also sport, can become extraordinary to individuals and groups (Durkheim, 1984; Weber (1991: xxx; 1991 [1915a])).

7. While Durkheim's predominant concern with the 'external' dimensions of social facts, and Weber's focus on the subjective elements of understanding and action, converge in their concern with embodiment, their contrasting emphases also provides us with grounding for analyzing in what follows both the organizational /structural features of sporting sacred modalities and how these are experienced by those involved in them.

8. Some may object to prioritizing the notion of 'sacred' this way in relation to Weber's work, preferring to associate it exclusively with Durkheim. Nevertheless, Weber's analyses of the extraordinary (designated through his use of such terms as the 'ultimate', 'charisma' and 'enchantment' *as well as by his use of 'the sacred'*) share with Durkheim's the characteristics of distinctiveness and the capacity to steer societies through their impact on people's embodied being. It is these characteristics, common to their writings, we associate with 'the

sacred' and explore through our explication of modalities of the sporting sacred. The differences separating Durkheim and Weber, furthermore, are evident in the differing modalities of the sacred we present, reflecting the specificities of their analyses.

9. The meaning of these other-worldly and social differentiation polarities is explicated in subsequent sections of this paper, but their essential features can be elaborated upon briefly here, while we should also emphasise that conceptions of the sporting sacred can be located at various points between the plus and minus polarities of these variables.

The other-worldly polarity denotes the extent to which sport is classified as constituting part of a level or sphere of reality which exists *beyond* that of mere organic existence and/or society (with society here seen as a self-contained, self-referential system as opposed to a phenomena that is itself viewed and experienced as possessing a religious dimension). Conceptions of the sporting sacred that involve a strong level of other-worldliness usually involve a religious component, as it is religions that have historically formulated most coherently conceptions of worlds (involving, for example, an afterlife) irreducible to the biological and social dimensions of human existence. Conceptions of the sporting sacred in which the other-worldly is weaker, in contrast, still regard sport as special, but the extraordinariness of this activity is defined wholly or largely by factors intrinsic to human biology and/or society.

The social differentiation polarity, in contrast, denotes the extent to which conceptions of the sporting sacred classify this activity as organizationally and experientially separate from other social and from religious considerations. Stronger levels of social differentiation identify sport as a sphere of activity that is relatively autonomous from its surroundings, while weaker levels denote circumstances in which the borders between sport and other aspects and areas of life become increasingly permeable. Our classification schema suggests that modalities of the sporting sacred can vary in the extent to which they are separated from social and religious forces.

10. These modalities will be explicated via the use of ideal types that emphasize their defining features. Our ideal type depiction draws on Weber (although Durkheim [1952] arguably employs ideal type depictions in explicating distinctive forms of suicide, despite his commitment to contrasting sociological methods) in acknowledging the necessity of analytically simplifying what are complex and shifting phenomena. The use of ideal-types is highly useful for the tasks of theory-building, generalisation and comparison key to our discussion even though care must be taken not to conflate the systematisation and unity suggested by their depiction with the complex reality of the social phenomena they represent (Weber, 1947: 294; Bendix, 1960). Our continued reference to ‘modalities’, however, denotes in more of a Durkheimian manner that these forms of the sporting sacred actually exist as concrete social forces that exert a real impact on those subject to them irrespective of individuals’ possible knowledge of their operation.

It is possible to object to utilizing these two approaches to explore the same issue, but there has been a long history in sociology of combining and reconstructing methodologies that focus heavily on either ‘external/objective’ or ‘internal/subjective’ social realities (involving recently such figures as Bourdieu, Giddens and Archer). Furthermore, employing both these emphases allows us to maintain that modalities of the sporting sacred are no less real or socially efficacious because of an analytical presentation of them that inevitably simplifies their worldly complexity, and is for us another sign of the analytical utility afforded by the strategy of drawing on both Durkheim and Weber.

11. Hijab transcends the area of dress, referring to modesty and modest behavior more generally, and is prescribed for men as well as women. However, its most visible manifestation in sports, and indeed in Islamic cultures more broadly, has been in the area of women’s dress in general and women’s head covering in particular.

12. As Foucault (2003: 243) argues, developing Weber's concerns with the rationalization of bodies, while modern governmental control may initially individualize humans, its development effects a de-differentiating, 'massifying' mode 'directed not at man-as-body but at man-as-species'. This emphasis on de-differentiation is shared in Hardt and Negri's (2000: 24) depiction of bio-politics as a mode of control extending 'across the entirety of social relations.'

13. The Mayor of London announced a crackdown on sex workers prior to the start of the London Olympics, for example, while the 2008 Beijing Olympics became notorious for those residents evicted forcibly to make way for the construction of sports and transport infrastructure.

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