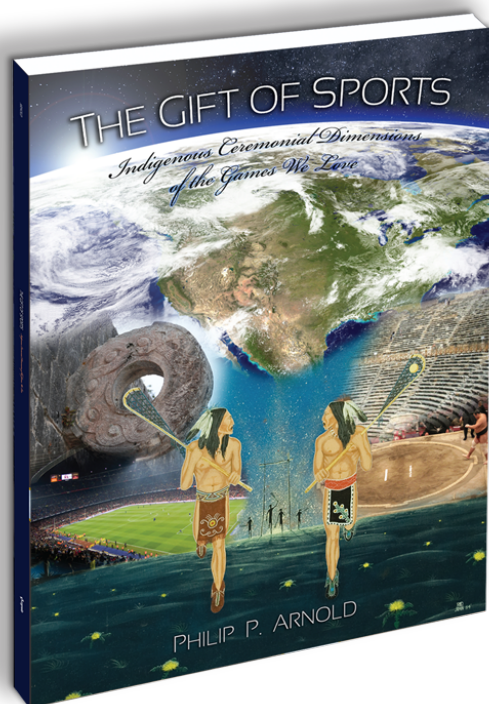




The Gift of Sports

Indigenous Ceremonial Dimensions of the Games We Love

First Edition

By Philip P. Arnold

Included in this preview:

- Copyright Page
- Table of Contents
- Three Sample Chapters

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Sneak Preview

THE GIFT OF SPORTS

*Indigenous Ceremonial Dimensions
of the Games We Love*

Philip P. Arnold

Syracuse University

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First published in the United States of America in 2012 by Cognella, Inc.

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16 15 14 13 12

1 2 3 4 5

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-1-62131-047-1

Dedication

To Mary Bigtree and Andrew Wolniak

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Acknowledgements

Many people have contributed to the development of this class and textbook. My students and I have been inspired by the wide array of speakers who also provided much encouragement in bringing the topic of religion and sports together: Adon Allen, Kal Alston, Christine Brennan, Jennifer Caplan, Michael Chaness, Thomas Clinton, Phil Cousineau, Fernando Delgado, Wendy Gonyea, Mark Holland, Alf Jacques, Kerry Lightcap, Kenneth Lokensgard, Kent Lyons, Oren Lyons, David L. Miller, Leo Nolan, Neal Powless, Gere Reisinger, Gewas Schindler, Shawn Schuyler, Roy Simmons, Jr., Curt Styres, Michael Taylor, Regy Thorpe, Doug Wright, Robert Vickers, and Thomas Vennum. How extraordinary to spend each week in class with some of the most gifted SU athletes and then watch them out on the playing field displaying their gifts. My whole understanding of sports, however, was transformed by having raised my twin boys through the Onondaga Nation Redhawks Box Lacrosse program, and to have the experience of seeing the depth with which the entire community regards the Creator's game. Central New York is a hotbed for local school sports programs, particularly at Jordan Elbridge, West Genesee, Lafayette and Fayetteville Manlius. I am grateful to the following graduate assistants for their invaluable help: Airen Hall, Shawn Krause-Loner, Rosanne Morici, Paul Morris, Robert Ruehl, Francis Sanzaro, Donovan Schaefer, and Kourtney Wolf. I was encouraged by the many hundreds of students who took this class, who wrote inspired papers and offered stimulating class discussions. I have also learned a great deal from my colleagues in religious studies about the religious importance of sports. Some of these include, Pia Altieri, Robert Baum, Lindsay Jones, Charlie Winkvist, and Michael Zogry. Special thanks go to two leading lights who not only changed my life through their work but who became most cherished colleagues that have inspired and guided my work over the last decades. They are noted historians of religions Charles H. Long and David Carrasco. Of course none of these people, as inspirational as they have been for the development of this book, are to be held responsible for its contents. Thanks too to John Remington of Cognella Press who convinced me to transform this class into a textbook.

Special thanks goes to Tom Huff, a renowned Seneca sculptor, for introducing me to the painting "The Creator's Game" by Rodney John, which was in Tom's personal collection. This painting perfectly depicts what I am trying to say in this book and therefore was a perfect cover. Rodney John, who is now passed away, was from New Town, Cattaraugus territory of

the Seneca Nation near Buffalo New York. He was an award winning, self taught, Seneca artist who painted in oils and acrylics. This painting is a cosmological depiction of lacrosse being played between the creator twins. Thanks also to Jack Hardendorf for having photographed the painting.

Finally I wish to thank my family. Two people who taught me the deep satisfaction and importance of being a devoted Syracuse University fan are my wife's uncle Andrew Wolniak and my mother-in-law Mary Bigtree. My wife Sandy Bigtree has commented on every aspect of this project and I could not have done it without her. Our twin sons Kroy and Clay have taught me many important life lessons that are possible through sports. It has been my greatest joy in life just to watch Clay and Kroy play lacrosse with Sandy.



Introduction

When I first started teaching here at Syracuse University (SU), I noticed that a number of lacrosse players, both Native and non-Native, were taking my Native American Religions class. I knew they were especially curious about this class because the game of lacrosse originated as a Native American game with roots in religious ceremony. What was interesting was that SU lacrosse players were already aware of this, but wanted to learn more. I came to appreciate that this was due to the fact that lacrosse coaching at SU follows strong connections to the Onondaga Nation. SU is located in Central New York on Onondaga Nation ancestral territory, which is the heartland of the Haudenosaunee (see below). So well before this class was created I wanted to challenge our notions of “sport” by considering the ritual origins to the game of this particular place and lacrosse. The result is this class—“Religion and Sports.” In effect this class, and this book, is an attempt to understand and appreciate the religious dimensions of lacrosse, the game’s connection to place, and perhaps challenge the way some currently perceive “sport” as entertainment or a commodity.

It would be more accurate to call this class “Religion AS Sports,” or “Sports as Religion.” Nearly all sports have their origins in religious ceremonies. Olympic games, hockey, sumo wrestling, and the martial arts are obvious examples, but more popular games like football, basketball, soccer, and golf have also connected directly with ancient ceremonies, or “performative” events. This class focuses on the most important local example of this, the Haudenosaunee (i.e., Iroquois) game of lacrosse. Even more important than the ceremonial history of sports, however, is the fact that sports are currently understood by enthusiasts and critics alike as a “religious activity.” The course will take the perspective that it is clearer to understand the current popularity and appeal of sports (including games of all types) as ceremonial activities rather than as business or entertainment activities.

In the first part of the class we will define religion as *exchange* in order to include sports. This follows from my work on indigenous religions. For this class, religion will be understood as a series of exchanges between different beings (gods, ancestors, animals, stars, plants, people, players, fans, announcers, cheerleaders, referees, etc.). We’ll ask several questions. What makes a gifted athlete or coach? Why are fans so devoted to their teams? What is sacred about sporting

venues? While reading this book, we will look at how sports can strengthen cultural and ethical values. How are sports a vital force in the development of youth and communities? Do sports help disenfranchised groups of people (women, African Americans and Native Americans, for example) overcome their social situations, or do they keep them trapped in their social roles? My position is that a greater diversity and inclusiveness in sports eventually improves them. We will also think about the difficult issues facing sports today and will go through some of these issues thematically, including racial issues, mascots, money, drugs, and women in sports.

Biography

My sports interests have been of the more solitary pursuits. Following high school I did technical rock and ice climbing and mountain skiing in the Rockies—what today would be called extreme sports. My passion began to wane when some friends of mine began suffering serious and even fatal injuries. That was a lifetime ago, but the reason I got into this topic today is because of my twin boys. Unlike me, and most probably because they are twins, they entered the world already enthusiasts of team sports, which I consider to be the real ceremonial heart of the sporting world. Since the age of three they have played box lacrosse for the Onondaga Nation Redhawks. Because of their passionate devotion to lacrosse, and to a lesser extent hockey, soccer, basketball, football—and whatever else might have a ball—I have come to learn and appreciate sports in a whole new way. I have combined my expertise as a History of Religions (“Comparative Religions”) scholar who works with indigenous peoples of the Americas (Aztec and Haudenosaunee) on matters of cultural survival (i.e., the sanctity of land and the environment, language, sacred games, etc.)—all material life that comprises an indigenous religious cosmology. You can check out recent accomplishments at my website (<http://thecollege.syr.edu/profiles/pages/arnold-philip.html>). My interest is in how sports creates and supports community by being a ceremonial center for human groups. In our modern world, it is my estimation that nothing more powerfully forms identity than sports. In this way sports is religion with a resemblance to indigenous “religious” phenomenon that connects people to cosmologies of places, groups of people, a history, and ancestors, as well as many other things.

I am an Associate Professor of Indigenous Religions in the Department of Religion at Syracuse University. I specialize in the indigenous religious traditions of the Americas. I worked in Mesoamerican materials for fifteen years, culminating in *Eating Landscape: Aztec and European Occupation of Tlalocan* (University of Colorado Press, 1999). Since 1990 I have been working more directly on issues related to indigenous peoples of the United States and Canada. I co-edited with Ann Grodzins Gold the book titled *Sacred Landscapes and Cultural Politics: Planting a Tree* (Ashgate, 2001). I’m finishing a textbook, *Indigenous Religions: An Introduction*, which will figure in to this textbook prominently. For a long time I have been collaborating with the Onondaga Nation which is the Central Fire of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. The Nation is located five miles south of Syracuse University. My concern is with issues related to “religion, spirituality, and land,” and I have given several talks to local groups through my association with NOON (Neighbors of the Onondaga Nation), which is a grassroots organization sponsored through the Syracuse Peace Council. Through NOON, we have helped develop a year-long series of events for 2006 and 2010 called “Onondaga Land

Rights and Our Common Future” (<http://www.peacecouncil.net/NOON/>). I have been fortunate to accompany a Haudenosaunee delegation to Tokyo, Japan on one occasion and to Melbourne, Australia, for the Parliament of World Religions, to participate in a series of meetings with scholars of religion and indigenous peoples from around the world. Since 2005 we have collaborated with people of the Onondaga Nation on an International Day of Peace event at Onondaga Lake. The sacred lake determines where the hierophany (i.e., “manifestation of the sacred”) of the Great Law of Peace came to the Haudenosaunee at Onondaga and whose influence eventually spread to the Founding Fathers of Western Democracy. The “Roots of Peacemaking” is an annual event that has brought people from around the world to the shores of Onondaga Lake to rekindle the Peacemaker’s message in the spirit of renewal and respect for the waters—water which permeates all life. Onondaga Lake is now the most chemically toxic body of water in all of the Americas. Speakers included: the late Chief Jake Swamp and Clanmother Audrey Shenandoah, Jane Goodall, Oren Lyons, Tom Porter, Wendy Gonyea, Robin Kimmerer, Andy Mager, Denise Waterman, Koji Nakamura, Evon Peter, Tonya Gonnella Frichner, Jun Yasuda, Kent Lyons, Sandy Bigtree, Suzan Shown Harjo, Sally Roesch Wagner, and Jack Rossen. Since 2007 we have been convening the Doctrine of Discovery study group (<http://www.doctrineofdiscovery.org>), which brings together academics, students, community members, and the Onondaga Nation to discuss the legacy of Christianity and its impact upon the destruction of indigenous peoples and their environment. In 2009 we initiated the newsletter and website Indigenous Values Initiative (<http://www.indigenousvalues.org>) in collaboration with the leadership of the Onondaga Nation. This class has grown out of the collaborative scholarship and educational initiatives that we have developed in the greater Syracuse area over the last decade or more. In all of these matters I have come to appreciate the centrality of the game of lacrosse, and of sports in general, as a means by which different communities of people can come together in an authentic way that does not erase the difficulties of our past, or the challenges that currently face us all.

Becoming “Orange,” or a deep fan of Syracuse University sports, was not something that was just a function of my teaching here at Syracuse. When I came to SU in 1996 my wife’s extended family introduced me to the Orange fandom. My mother-in-law Mary Bigtree and her brother Uncle Andy Wolniak—who have since passed on--were dedicated fans of Syracuse University sports. Their family grew up poor on the Southside of Syracuse in the early 20th century. For them the Syracuse University “Orangemen” (as they were called then), were a source of pride in their city and also their connecting link to the university on the hill. They loved to talk about Ernie Davis and Jim Brown. They knew all the details of SU sports history. Uncle Andy used to take me to the basketball and football games. It was through their influence that I became Orange. It is why I have dedicated this book to them. Becoming a fan is more than just being a teacher or student at a school, because many of my colleagues and students would not consider themselves as “Orange.” Rather it has to do with what sports played by a particular team means to you. Mary and Uncle Andy taught me the meaning of being “Orange” by revealing to me the larger picture that “Orange” pride extends beyond the university and into a legacy and community.

This also shed new light on the responsibility of raising twin athletes. Being the father of twin boys who grew up playing lacrosse since they were 3 years old for the Onondaga Nation Redhawks, oddly enough, also contributed to my becoming “Orange.” Learning to appreciate the Indigenous values of the game of lacrosse and seeing its influence on my sons and students

has made me appreciate more the sporting heritage of Syracuse University. Much of that pride comes from the fact that we live and work in Onondaga Nation territory, the heartland of the Haudenosaunee. I have been marked and being “Orange” is part of who I am in the world; as part of a legacy of SU sports and living in Central New York—and of that, I am proud.



Religion as Sports

We are all familiar with the religious celebrations in sporting events: the football player who makes the sign of the cross when he makes a touchdown and the basketball player who points to the sky as a sign of thank you after a win. Several players, coaches and programs have dedicated their games to promoting their religion, which is most often a form of “Evangelical” Christianity. Several organizations are dedicated to using sports to propagate Christianity. Two of these are the “Promise Keepers,” a Christian evangelical organization focused on men that utilizes sporting venues around the country (<http://www.promisekeepers.org/>) and the “Fellowship of Christian Athletes,” which develops kids in different sports, combining their athletic training with Christian training (<http://www.fca.org/>). Oftentimes coaches and players use religious activities like group prayers to try to better improve the team and improve the outcome of the game.

According to Tom Krattenmaker in his book *Onward Christian Athletes: Turning Ballparks in to Pulpits and Players in to Preachers* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2009) conservative Christianity has been slowly and steadily transforming sports. He asks the question: Is everyone in favor of this sort of religion (i.e., Evangelical Christianity) taking hold of sports so completely? What if, for example, some teammates are atheists, Jews, Muslims, or people of other faiths? What about the fans? Is conservative and evangelical Christianity usually tolerant of religious diversity? Given a diversity of religions among players and fans, does the Christianization of sports unify a team or do the opposite? Is it right? Is it practical?

Others have asked: What is the theology (understanding and discussion of God) being expressed in these religious uses of sports? If we understand that God is on our side when we win, or score, what does this imply if we lose? Is God with winners and with losers? Some athletes say that their prayers around the game are meant to express gratitude to a higher power that has allowed them to play. I think this is more appropriate, but there is a celebration, or cult, of winning in our modern world. Some have questioned the values expressed when a “cult of winning” combines with religious devotion in sports. Does combining winning with theology give a misguided understanding of an appropriate human relationship with the divine?

I want to think about religion differently. It’s not so much about how people use sports to propagate a particular religion; rather, it is to see how sporting events themselves are religious and ceremonial events. One can dedicate a game to whomever one wishes—a fan, former

athlete, someone who has died, God, etc. From a Native American religions point of view, which I will go into in more detail below, the sporting event itself is a ceremonial event—it is intrinsically sacred. In our capitalistic society where football, basketball, soccer and baseball games are televised around the world, the temptation is to use this occasion to propagate one's religion. But if the sporting event were only for one's family, friends, and community, then it wouldn't make sense to propagate that as a global religion. Can you imagine someone playing for a community softball team, for example, pointing to the sky after hitting a home run? Wouldn't that be a bit odd? Rather, one plays to the best of one's ability to please those watching in the community—we play for each other. For indigenous peoples, those watching include the human beings, but also the non-human beings and spiritual beings, often expressed as the Creator.

So this class asks: What is intrinsically religious about sports? What are the elements of sports that are ceremonial, sacred, powerful, etc.? There are echoes of these indigenous elements throughout the modern games that we will want to discuss. First, however, we have to deal with the ambiguity of “religion.”

Some Definitions of Religion by Notable People

Compiled by Professor Ann Grodzins Gold, Syracuse University

1. Ludwig Feuerbach, 1841

“... is man's earliest and also indirect form of self-knowledge ...

“... is the childlike condition of humanity ...

“... is the dream of the human mind. But even in dreams we do not find ourselves in emptiness or in heaven, but on earth, in the realm of reality.”

2. Karl Marx, 1844

“... is the sigh of the oppressed creature ...

“... is only the illusory sun which revolves around man as long as he does not revolve around himself.

“... the fantastic realization of the human essence because the human essence has no true reality. The struggle against religion is therefore ... the fight against the other world, of which religion is the spiritual aroma.

3. Eward Tylor, 1871

“... [is] the belief in Spiritual Beings.”

4. Vivekananda, c. 1893

“... is the manifestation of the Divinity already in man.”

5. Emile Durkheim, c. 1915

“... is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.”

6. Sigmund Freud, 1927

“Religious ideas are teachings and assertions about facts and conditions of external (or internal) reality which tell one something one has not discovered for oneself and which lay claim to one’s belief. Since they give us information about what is most important and interesting to us in life, they are particularly highly prized. ...

We must ask where the inner force of those doctrines lies and to what it is that they owe their efficacy, independent as it is of recognition by reason.

... religious beliefs ... are illusions, fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind. The secret of their strength lies in the strength of those wishes.”

7. Alfred North Whitehead, c. 1927

“... is what the individual does with his own solitariness; and if you were never solitary, you were never religious.”

8. Bronislaw Malinowski, 1931

“... is not born out of speculation or reflection, still less out of illusion or misapprehension, but rather out of the real tragedies of human life, out of the conflict between human plans and realities. ... Every important crisis of human life implies a strong emotional upheaval, mental conflict and possible disintegration. ... Religious belief consists in the traditional standardization of the positive side in the mental conflict and therefore satisfies a definite individual need On the other hand, religious belief and ritual, by making the critical acts and the social contracts of human life public, traditionally standardized, and subject to supernatural sanctions, strengthen the bonds of human cohesion.

9. Carl Jung, 1938

“... appears to me to be a peculiar attitude of the human mind, ... that is, a careful consideration and observation of certain dynamic factors, understood to be ‘powers,’ spirits, demons, gods, laws, ideas, ideals or whatever name man has given to such factors as he has found in his world powerful, dangerous or helpful enough to be

taken into careful consideration, or grand, beautiful and meaningful enough to be devoutly adored and loved. ... 'Religion,' it might be said, is the term that designates the attitude peculiar to a consciousness which has been altered by the experience of the numinosum."

10. Mohandas Gandhi, c. 1940

"... is the permanent element in human nature which counts no cost too great in order to find full expression and which leaves the soul utterly restless until it has found itself, known its Maker and appreciated the true correspondence between the Maker and itself. ... Religion is to morality what water is to the seed that is sown in the soil."

11. Robert Lowie, 1952

"... is verily a universal feature of human culture, not because all societies foster a belief in spirits, but because all recognize in some form or other awe-inspiring, extraordinary manifestations of reality ... those cultural phenomena ... which center about or are somehow connect with the sense of mystery or weirdness."

12. Paul Tillich, 1963

"... is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains *the answer to the question of the meaning of our life*. Therefore this concern is unconditionally serious and shows a willingness to sacrifice any finite concern which is in conflict with it. The predominant religious name for the content of such a concern is God—a god or gods.

13. Clifford Geertz, 1966

"... is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic."

14. Peter Berger, 1967

"... is the audacious attempt to conceive of the entire universe as being humanly significant.

15. Frederick Streng, 1969

"... is ... a means of ultimate transformation. This definition focuses on the dynamic process of change in religious life, a change from a disharmonious, illusory, evil, or destructive state of existence to ultimate harmony, enlightenment, purity, or creative power."

16. Daniel Bell, 1980 [summarized by Mary Douglas]

[offers] "... a set of coherent answers to the universal existential problems of mankind. Its answers may be codified into a creed and celebrated with rites, and these may be established in institutions. The general effect of religion is to create coherence in experience and emotional bonds between those who adhere to the credal form."

17. Charles H. Long, 1986

"... will mean orientation—orientation in the ultimate sense, that is, how one comes to terms with the ultimate significance of one's place in the world. ... The religion of any people is more than a structure of thought; it is experience, expression, motivations, intentions, behaviors, styles, and rhythms."

18. Cornell West, 1994

[means] "... ligare, to bind; religare, to rebind in the midst of deep crisis, in the midst of scars and bruises and wounds and heartaches and heartbreaks and sadness and sorrow. We can also begin anthropologically and look at religion from a more basic level: we frivolous, two legged, linguistically conscious creatures, born between urine and feces, we must weave some webs of meaning and significance as we face inevitable and inescapable extinction. We are not here that long. In order to make this short sojourn meaningful, of some significance, we must come up with some sense of a story, a narrative, a ritual in a community, some bonds of affection, some networks of support, some cords or ties of empathy and sympathy and compassion."



What is Religion?

For me, the most liberating thing about the academic study of religion is the ambiguity of the term “religion.” The central organizing principle of my department at Syracuse University, and most every department dedicated to the academic study of religion, is not the certainty of religion, but the uncertainty of the question: What is religion? Although my colleagues and I all teach about religion (Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Native American Religions, etc.) we all conceptualize religion very differently from one another. We could never agree on a single definition of religion. But my department is not unique. There is a tremendous diversity of opinion in all departments of religion regarding the essential characteristics of “religion.” To some degree this diversity of opinion can be accounted for by the diversity of places where religion is taught. Seminaries, secular universities, technical colleges, etc. all develop their programs and departments of religions very differently from one another. This effects the ways that they tend to define “religion.”

But this has been going on for generations. If one assembles the most used and agreed upon definitions of religion of the last 150 years from all the leading intellectual giants of their respective generations (above)—as did my colleague Ann Grodzins Gold many years ago—then one finds that there is virtually no agreement. Some will define it as a diseased mental state—a kind of psychosis—while others have seen it as a resource for ultimate, all-encompassing truths. Some have emphasized religion as being the social glue that holds people and communities together, while others emphasize religion as a solitary pursuit of a questing individual. Some have thought of religion as primarily a feature of human experience, particularly the experience of death, while others have tended to see religion as a duty or cultural responsibility in which the person participates in ceremonies as a way of perpetuating their tradition. Some see religion as oppressive, while others see it as a force that liberates the oppressed. The point here is that “religion” can be all of these things in different contexts. It is a contentious ground for any discussion (that’s why many people avoid it as a topic in pleasant company) because of its ambiguous nature.

I have noticed, however, that the understanding of the ambiguity of “religion,” that is readily acknowledged within the academic study of religion, is not shared in the wider culture. In fact, just the opposite sense of religion is readily apparent whenever it is discussed in the media or other areas of intellectual endeavor. Most often “religion” for many is not ambiguous at all, but

rather a definite reality—even a thing or object that exists independent of the human imagination. Most people have an institutional concept of religion. Others have a superstitious or faith-based notion of “religion.” Ironically, religion is most often regarded as deeply individualistic, which is often at odds with its cultural and social function. But the sense of “religion” is always definite and rarely ambiguous. In the popular imagination, certainty and religion seem to go together. But the phenomenon of religion most often expresses its contentious and ambiguous nature rather than any level of certainty. Most often “religion” for the religious is a “cipher,” an uncertainty, a mystery at the center of human existence that cannot be easily deciphered. Ironically, the certainty in what defines “religion” has more to do with the imposition of order and control over a phenomenon. However, the phenomenon is always breaking the mold by revealing itself in new and radically different ways.

Defining “Religion”

Above, there are 18 definitions of religion, which have been suggested by prominent intellectuals over the last 150+ years. The point is that no one can agree as to what religion is! As you read and discover more about other religions, the question of “what is religion?” inevitably comes up. In many ways, this is an American question. So our first task in addressing “what are the religious dimensions of sports?” has to be answered with “what is religion?” There are several good organizations and websites dedicated to this question: “What is religion?” Some of these are the “Pluralism Project” at Harvard (<http://www.pluralism.org/>); Inter-Faith Works in Syracuse (<http://interfaithworkscny.org/blog/>); the website “Why Study Religion?” (<http://www.studyreligion.org/why/index.html>); and the very old and prestigious organization “Council for a Parliament of World Religions” (<http://www.parliamentofreligions.org/index.cfm>). In addition, however, there is a companion question that is addressed throughout this class, which in many ways is a uniquely American question: “How does one study, know and appreciate the diversity of religion?” and are there other cultural phenomena, like sports, that share significant characteristics with “religion”?

Let’s take a few examples. First, the most glaring disagreement for me is between those who hold an individualistic definition of religion, such as Whitehead (religion is what one does in their solitude), and those who hold that religion is an essential component to community life, such as Durkheim. Then there are those who think of religion as growing out of the human condition, such as Tylor, who holds religion to be a belief in spiritual beings. Actually, Tylor is referring specifically to how people dream about the dead and from that experience, understand their connection to deities and an afterlife. In other words, Tylor is interested in the origins of religion and how that is connected with the finite nature of human existence.

Many of the authors are interested in the connection between human “finitude,” or the limited nature of human existence (i.e., death) and religion. Cornell West, for example, talks about religion as liberation from the oppressive elements in human existence. For him people are born and they die and they have to deal with various oppressive elements in their existence along the way. Religion is a way out of that limited condition. West, by the way, is a famous professor of African American Studies at Princeton University whom you may have seen on TV. Likewise Marx, whom many American students have trouble with, thinks that religion

is also the sigh of the oppressed. But for Marx, religion can also be the oppressor. This is an important feature of religion that others have not mentioned. For example, religious interpretations have been used to justify horrendous acts of violence and enslavement in the cases of Native and African American people. Ideas about “finitude” simultaneously get us in to the liberating and oppressive elements in religion.

Finally, I want to draw your attention to Long’s definition of religion as orientation to the ultimate significance of the world. He is saying that religion is more than just what happens at churches or other religious institutions. Religion is a way that a community of people engage the material world through all kinds of activities. Long is a renowned scholar of African American religions and one of the founders of my discipline of the History of Religions—which some people refer to as Comparative Religion. His concern is to create a definition of religion that can be utilized in a cross-cultural context—or one that many people from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds can recognize. Many cultures do not have an equivalent to the word “religion” in their language. Therefore, what we in the academy may call “religion” may not be recognizable to other people around the world. How are we then to discuss those things which look and feel like religion but are not labeled as such? How can we compare apples and oranges?

On another personal note, I think the ambiguity of religion is a good and powerful thing. This kind of course on “Religions and Sports” is, in many ways, an American course. Since we hold the “freedom of religion” and the “freedom from religion” in the USA as essential individual freedoms given to us by the Constitution, then we have to cope with almost limitless diversity of opinion on the essential nature of religion. But my feeling is that we are still trying to work out of an 18th century model of diversity. Right now there is a religious diversity in the USA that the Founding Fathers could not have even imagined. Religion is not disappearing, as some of the intellectuals who were defining religion 150 year ago imagined, but increasing exponentially. But in our increasing diversity, the question of what counts as “religion” and what does not count has become more and more contentious. Keeping the question of religion essentially open and ambiguous, in the words of Elie Wiesel, will unite people, but answering the question of religion (and thereby eliminating its mystery), will separate the people.

But our task here is to ask, “... what is religious about sport?” Given the diversity of opinion about the nature of “religion,” then how would you answer this question? Use the definitions above as a start. In your opinion, which definition seems closest to sports? Which definitions seem completely at odds with sports? I will wade in next time to answer this question from an indigenous religions perspective, but first we’ll want to consult the experts.

Indigenous Religions and Sports

As I have mentioned, there is a relationship between people who live in a simple relationship with the land—and sports. They are often referred to as indigenous peoples, but this is more a descriptive term. Native Americans would be seen as the indigenous peoples of the Americas (Canadians refer to them as “First Nations Peoples” and they go by different terms throughout Latin America). Aborigines are what indigenous peoples are called in Australia.

Indigenous peoples have names for themselves too. Locally Native Americans in upstate New York and into Pennsylvania and Canada are called “Iroquois.” This term has its root in another Native American language and has negative connotations. They are more generally known as the “Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy.” The word that they use for themselves is the “Haudenosaunee,” which translates as “People of the Longhouse,” or “People Building a Longhouse.” Below is an image of the “Confederacy Belt,” or “Hiawantha Belt,” which is an ancient beaded belt made of wampum (a worked shell bead of purple and white from the quahog shell, found along the Atlantic seaboard from Maine to the Carolinas). From left to right, the symbols represent the Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga (symbolized by Great Tree of Peace planted at the Center), Oneida, and Mohawk Nations.¹ The Hiawantha Belt is also understood to be a map that extends across upstate New York, representative of the five original nations in the Confederacy. The Hiawantha Belt was repatriated (i.e., returned) to the Haudenosaunee in the early 1980’s from a museum of Anthropology at SUNY-Albany. Since then it has come to represent the flag of the Haudenosaunee, which can be seen displayed prominently by Haudenosaunee people in Central New York and throughout all Haudenosaunee territories. It is the flag of the Iroquois Nationals lacrosse team, which competes internationally in the World Lacrosse International Championships.

Syracuse University is located five miles north of the Onondaga Nation. As the Hiawantha Belt indicates, Onondaga is the Central Fire of the Haudenosaunee—represented by the Great Tree of Peace—and where the Confederacy was founded on the shores of Onondaga Lake. Three prominent figures joined together at Onondaga Lake and convinced the Haudenosaunee to dedicate themselves to the Great Law of Peace by throwing their weapons of war beneath the roots of the Great Tree of Peace.² Of the 565 Native American entities recognized by the U.S. Federal Government today, only three are still governed by their ancient ceremonial systems. All three are Haudenosaunee, and one of these is the Onondaga Nation. Onondaga territory still operates by the ancient Longhouse system of government. Other Native American nations are governed by elected governments and controlled by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA)—a branch of the United States Federal Government. All Longhouse people at the Onondaga Nation hold membership in their matrilineal clans. Male chiefs are “raised” by Clan-mothers. The Haudenosaunee system of governance impressed and influenced the “Founding Fathers” who wrote the U.S. Constitution. They also influenced mid-19th century women at Seneca Falls, where the women’s rights movement began in the U.S. The Onondaga Nation has adhered to their traditional ceremonial practices for thousands of years. Many cultural benefits have come to the United States from the Haudenosaunee. Their game of lacrosse and its profound affect on the region of Central New York, Syracuse University, and the rest of the world will further be discussed.

1 The Tuscarora Nation became the sixth to join the Haudenosaunee in the 1720’s when they came north from South Carolina to escape the slave traders and aggressive appropriations of their lands by European settlers.

2 Dating the origins of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy is a matter of scholarly debate. One estimate is 1142 CE, by Barbara Mann and Jerry L. Fields in their article “A Sign in the Sky: Dating the League of the Haudenosaunee [*American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 21.2 (August, 1997): 105–63].” Another is 909 AD. Some Haudenosaunee think it is much older than these dates.

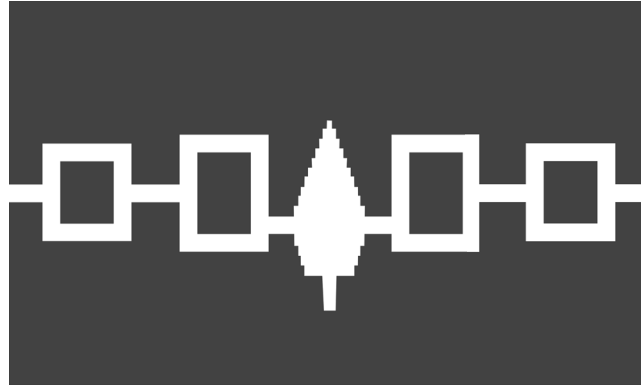


Figure 1: The "Hiawantha" or Confederacy Wampum Belt. Now the national flag of the original five nations of the Haudenosuanees, the symbols represent (from left): Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga (the Tree), Oneida, and Mohawk.

All indigenous peoples have their games. For the Haudenosaunee, the game of Deyhontsigwa'ehs (They Bump Hips), or "Lacrosse," as it is known now, is a sacred game often referred to as the "Creator's Game."³ Throughout the United States, there are different forms of lacrosse played by different Native American groups.⁴ Among the Aztecs there was an ancient ceremonial game that has been called "ulama," or "rubber ball." Today it is simply called "The Ballgame." There are countless sports among different indigenous peoples of Africa, Asia, and all the continents.

Academics interested in the study of religion, who work with these different indigenous peoples, often are interested in these games. Playing the games at certain times of the year are ceremonial occasions. So even though they are fun for the entire community, sporting events are also quite serious. Academics are drawn to indigenous sports as religion for a few reasons, but principle among these is the fact that "religion" is a problematic category for indigenous peoples. First, there is nothing that one can tag as "religious" among indigenous peoples. As has been said, their sense of the spiritual reality permeates throughout all of human existence and the material world. Second, "religion" has been used to aggressively conquer them by converting them to Christianity or Islam (primarily) in different parts of the world. "Religion," therefore, often has negative connotations for indigenous peoples. Third, often time ceremonies are kept secret from outside observers. This has to do with attempts by missionaries and governments in the recent past to destroy indigenous religious practices. But sporting events are usually much more public.

In order to understand sports as "religion" from an indigenous perspective, therefore, we have to define religion in a couple of ways. First we'll talk about religion as "habitation" (that is how a person or community inhabits the land). Second, and most importantly, we'll talk about religion as "exchange" (that is, how ceremonial events, like sporting events, are all about exchanges between different people and other beings).

³ See the Onondaga Nation website at <http://www.onondaganation.org/>

⁴ For an understanding of the Cherokee game see Michael J. Zogry, *Anetso, the Cherokee Ball Game: At the Center of Ceremony and Identity* (UNC Press, 2010).



Religion as Habitation

Being oriented to sacred places goes very deep in all religions, not just indigenous religions. Without sacred places, there would not have been “religion.” What is known of human history and cultural geography clearly indicates that the development of what we now call “religion” emanates from and revolving around sacred places. In the History of Religions, a sacred reality manifests itself in material form to a wide variety of people. According to Mircea Eliade, in his book *Myth of the Eternal Return*, practically everything has been the site of a *hierophany*, “manifestation of the sacred.” Jerusalem, Mt. Ararat, and Mecca are but a few examples of sacred places. For Eliade, they found the world so that it is habitable. Without the hierophany, a human community cannot meaningfully exist in the world. These manifestations of the sacred are the precondition for the creation of all human communities. Without the hierophany, there would be no orientation to the cosmos. Hierophanies—or “manifestations of the sacred”—are the founding events that established religions all over the world.

Sacred Places in the History of Religions

Sacred places have played a pivotal role in the origins of religions around the world. According to Eliade, places in which a sacred reality has revealed itself (or places of a hierophany) are the center of the world, or the “axis mundi,” toward which human communities are oriented. Ceremonies at these sacred sites bring human beings into intimate contact with sacred beings. A dramatic example of this phenomenon is seen in Islam when Muslims kneel in prayer five times a day facing Mecca. Sacred places are literally the center of the world (i.e., axis mundi) because they are the sites in which a sacred reality has broken into material life—where the sacred manifests itself in the material world. These places thus become places that mediate between human beings and sacred beings. The History of Religions has taught us that without these special places of the hierophany, there would be no religion. Can you think of other places where hierophanies have occurred?

Ceremonies at sacred sites are a fundamental aspect of all religious activity. These ceremonies often include sporting events. There are numerous examples of how sporting contests at



Figure 2: A sign at Devil's Tower, or the Bear's Lodge, that describes this as sacred for Native Americans.

"sacred," but each has their own distinctive way of expressing this idea through sports. For the Lakota, Devil's Tower—which they call the "Bear's Lodge"—is a place where they have access to Wakan Tanka, the sacred being responsible for all life on earth. To demonstrate their gratitude for all life—and thus their debt to the Creator—they run around the sacred track that retraces the race run at the time of Creation between two-legged and four-legged creatures. So the energy they expend through the footrace is a gift for their Creator—Wakan Tanka. For the climbers, however, their understanding of Devil's Tower as a sacred place has to do with their experience of being in touch with the rock. I was once a climber and actually climbed Devil's Tower in the 1970s and at that time the U.S. National Park Service did not acknowledge that it was a Lakota sacred place. Today, however it is described as a sacred place and climbers are asked to voluntarily refrain from climbing it during the month of June, or during the summer solstice, because this is when major Lakota ceremonies take place.

When I was climbing we would often associate our being in touch with the rock as an accomplishment with the "conquest" of its peak. This conquering aspect of sports can also be seen as a religious impulse, but

particular places, at particular times of the year, have an effect on pleasing a sacred being. People of a religion play these games to please a deity, or divine force, so that fertility returns to the earth and to human beings. In the film *In the Light of Reverence*, controversies around sacred places between Native Americans (or indigenous peoples of the Americas) and immigrant peoples (primarily of Euro-American descent), demonstrate these religious differences. In one section of the film they examine cultural differences between rock climbers and Lakota people on how they each regard "Devil's Tower," which is an amazingly beautiful peak in eastern Wyoming near the Black Hills. Each group claims to regard it as



Figure 3: Devil's Tower, or The Bear's Lodge.

rooted in colonizing or conquering relationships with the American landscape, which is a sharp distinction from indigenous ideas of cohabiting the land with other spiritual beings. Climbing and Lakota running mark how the same sacred place can be understood in completely distinctive ways. It also indicates how sacred places are understood to be the material basis of religious connections with a sacred reality, whether from indigenous or immigrant (or colonial, or conquering) perspectives.

In both perspectives, however, Devil's Tower is a sacred place that orients their respective communities to the meaning of material life. It is the “axis mundi” that founds and organizes their worldviews. In spite of the ongoing controversy, all agree that the place remains sacred.

Materiality of Religion

According to Eliade, ceremonies performed with respect to divine beings at specific places properly orient human communities to the material workings of life. Throughout history human survival had depended on connecting with a hidden, spiritual dimension of material life, and this can be seen as largely having to do with the origins of all religions. Rather than thinking of religion as a dimension of *faith*, or belief—what people hold in their hearts and/or minds—as we do in the modern world, adherents of the “materiality of religion” understand that religion is much more about what people *do*, how they behave, and what they understand to be necessary for physical survival and the continuation of life. This class is less interested in what people believe and more interested in what people do.

How people tend to understand the mysteries of life, therefore, informs how they are oriented toward material life. This is a different way to think about religion. If one looks at the origins of religion and also at indigenous religions, ceremonies reveal how people inhabit their material worlds. Sporting events in these cultural contexts, too, continue to be about promoting relationships between human beings and sacred beings. This is to ensure that the material world continues to function as it always has. Often sporting ceremonies follow the agricultural cycle, or the human fertility cycle, to enliven this human–divine relationship.

Ceremonies have to do with how people inhabit the world—religion as habitation. There are echoes of this ancient orientation in modern sporting events, which follow an agricultural cycle: Football in Fall, Basketball in Winter, and Baseball in Summer. Why is such pride expressed for one's home team—whether it is for a school, a town, or a state? Fans, short for “fanatic,” are devoted to teams but often don't know anyone on the team. I'm a devoted Syracuse University fan and think it has informed my pride for living in this place. Being “orange” connects me to this place unlike anything else. When I see someone wearing an orange “Syracuse” t-shirt here or somewhere else in the world, it creates an instant connection.