

Religious Rhetoric in Southern College Football: New Uses for Religious Metaphors

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Southern sports teams embrace the notion that attendance and participation by competitors and fans alike have made the activity, especially collegiate football, the new locus of religious passion. Social media resources on YouTube, home team motivational videos, and professionally produced documentaries use religious metaphors to communicate the notion that college football fills the same function for celebrants as does the local church. These examples of social media have become a “voice” for the fans as they practice this para-religious exercise. This article analyzes the use of religious metaphors and references social media as examples of how the use of such iconic videos can demonstrate the ongoing connection between religious communication and sports to a wider community of sports fans.

The popularity of major collegiate sports has begun to encroach upon the traditional role of the religious institution as the bastion of spiritual discipline. Many college teams have a team or local religious figure offer up prayers before a game begins, despite the fact that in all other regards there is a clear separation of church and state activities. Many collegiate teams have Bible studies, attended by many athletes outside of practice.

Recent academic literature abounds with declarations of the cultural connections between sports and religion.¹ What is particularly apparent in this research is that specific subcultures attach rhetorical meanings with religious metaphors to sports. One regional subculture stands out especially with its affinity for religion and sports: the

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American South. “Today the American South, probably more than any other region in the United States zealously mixes religion and sport.”² Eric Bain-Selbo, a professor of philosophy and religion at Western Kentucky University, summarizes his own survey data from 2005/2006 as revealing that the way fans describe the experience of college football assumes “that they are having religious experiences as a consequence of their participation in Southern college football rituals.”³

One can discover primary evidence in artifacts for this claim as substance emerges from social media resources found on YouTube, home team motivational videos shown on large stadium screens, Facebook and Twitter conversations, and even professionally produced documentaries. The Louisiana State University (LSU) Tigers football promoters have turned the legacy of sports metaphors inside out by using religious metaphors to describe the passion, the loyalty, and the fan-based exuberance at an LSU football game as if the fans were attending a religious service, not merely a sports event. A rhetorical analysis of the October 16, 2010 1:47-minute video, first shown before the McNeese State game at the Baton Rouge campus, demonstrates how metaphors communicate the “religious” fervor of die-hard LSU fans for the beloved football team. Since the 2010 initial showing, a 2011 and 2012 update with “text” of religious metaphors embedded in the presentation as well as a 2011 three-hour documentary entitled *Old War Skule: The Story of Saturday Night* have continued the metaphorical juxtapositions of religious nomenclature and popular collegiate sports.

The legacy of such religious metaphors in major college football is not merely linked to one Southern university. As far back as 1926, “Southern reporters and editors employed the language of Zion to explain the significance of this football victory [the University of Alabama upset of the University of Washington at the Rose Bowl]: it was a ‘blessed event,’ even a ‘miracle.’”⁴

Perhaps some readers may read with disdain the blatant attempts to promote the Southern collegiate football teams, but as examples these social media artifacts merely reflect a more universal attempt to find evidence for the gradual seizure of religious metaphors to explain fan fervor for collegiate sports in general and college football in the South in particular. The Southeastern Conference (SEC) is certainly not the only athletic conference that treats its teams with such religious fervor or support. Even the “trash talk” occasionally ventures into the realm of religious communication when opposing teams or fans carry signage declaring that their opponents are bound for the lands of eternal separation from God.

Type into your computer’s Internet search engines the phrase “religion and football” and you will be transported to the realms of social media that include a vast array of rhetorical artifacts. Even atheists chime in with personal videos that decry the trappings of religion and college football.⁵ There is an iconic subcultural “national anthem” entitled “Football is Our Religion” by the country/rock group Rednex.⁶ It seems that the Southern “Bible Belt” subculture encourages this amalgamation of traditional religious language and the fanatical following of college football. Each motivational video has Facebook or Twitter responses, which also enable the fans to further the religious connections. In this article, metaphor is discussed as rhetorical

theory, followed by a link of sports metaphors to religious expression and the current juxtaposition of religious metaphors to describe the collegiate sports culture. The LSU motivational video explication serves as one sample of SEC football program efforts to further the religious connection. It appears that rhetorically key religious metaphors spread the “gospel” of Southern college football.

Metaphor as Rhetorical Theory

Metaphor is home to philosophers and linguists and mathematicians and scientists—all those who use symbolic logic. It is the musician’s province as well as the painter’s and sculptor’s and filmmaker’s and politician’s (think *rhetoric*).⁷

Perhaps the term “athlete” or “coach” needs to be added to this vocational listing as well. The study of the rhetoric of metaphor is most frequently linked to the written word, but clearly *metaphorical rhetoric* can be found elsewhere. Once thought to be merely “decorative language” by early theorists such as Aristotle and Cicero, metaphoric analysis has become more than the identification of “something *is* something else” as a linguistic device.⁸ Twentieth-century rhetorical critics such as Michael Osborn and Robert L. Ivie have developed new applications of the metaphor based on the notion that our language choices create and govern our understanding of reality.⁹ At root level, we cannot express an opinion or describe an event without attempting to link symbolic representations, most notably our language, to the phenomenon. And as Foss reminds us, “Metaphor is a basic way by which the process of using symbols to know reality occurs.”¹⁰

Attempting to define a prototype or archetype metaphor is frequently difficult. The concept is unusually amorphous because it “can be either a thing or an idea.”¹¹ Chesebro, Bertelsen, and Gencarelli offer an attempt to operationalize the criteria for evaluating the rhetorical impact of archetypal metaphors by listing seven principles.¹² Other theorists’ commentary will help clarify the concepts as well.

First, archetypes are not isolated phenomena. They occur frequently and are referenced on a *recurring basis*. Osborn calls this feature *popularity* and a noteworthy characteristic is the frequency of use in rhetorical discourse.¹³ Second, archetypes are *transcendent*. Clearly, comparative events or situations must share commonalities in order for the analogy to fit. Third, archetypes are based on a principle of *linguistic constructionism*. Humans discover the connecting traits, “the prominent features of experience . . . which are inescapably salient in human consciousness.”¹⁴ Fourth, archetypes are a product of social contracts and are better understood as *learned associations*. Prominent social organizations or religious groups pass on the “power” of the archetype. Archetypes seem immune to change because the pattern of preferential selections binds the social organization together with a common linguistic interpretation of the archetype. Fifth, archetypes inherently have the quality of *ambiguity*. Lack of precise meaning and multiple connections expands the application of the archetype because it does not necessarily only represent a narrow interpretation. Sixth, archetypes have inherent *emotional reactions* from the social organization. From

the archetype a community may trace its identity, feel inspired, reel with horror and be in awe of its perceived power to influence. Seventh, archetypes provide *order, unity, and commonality of shared experience*. Janice Rushing and Thomas Frentz describe this unity with Jungian terminology that focuses upon the Self as the unifying component of the archetype:

The Self is not, like the ego, confined to time and space; it expresses itself in the nascent wholeness—both, general human wholeness and the unity of an individual life. It is represented by dreams, and myths as an ideal personality, as God, or in images of oneness, wholeness, eternalness, and centeredness.¹⁵

It is not unusual for an archetype to impact several diverse situations, but the unifying nature of the archetype will reduce the different situations to one unifying characteristic.

These seven principles can be exemplified in four primary metaphors found in the social media samples to be discussed later in this article.

As noted, among contemporary metaphor critics, Osborn has focused upon the “archetypal metaphor” as worthy of study and analysis. However, some archetypes move beyond mere descriptions of nature’s vast variety (e.g., light, dark, sea, death, the sacred, disease, remedy) to the reflection of earlier historical or “mythical notions” of reality. In most Judeo/Islamic/Christian cultures, the narrative record of the Bible provides *prototype* metaphors that are ageless and seem to permeate literature, public address, architecture and popular culture.¹⁶ Such biblical references serve as the original pattern or event (*archetype*) but are eventually perceived as “prototypical.” Whether a critic accepts the *archetype* as literal, figurative, or mythic, the examples from the Bible (or Talmud or Qu’ran) prove to be powerful linguistic devices, used throughout the ages to explain reality. In particular, the admonitions of the Apostle Paul use iconic prototypes from first-century sports endeavors to describe religious practices and disciplines. These Pauline literary figures have become prototypical over the years, especially when religious communication is the construct to be analyzed.

A Biblical Legacy of Sports Metaphors

Though there is no direct evidence that the Apostle Paul himself was engaged in athletic endeavors, as a Roman citizen he would have been an observer of Olympian sports events or other athletic races. His missionary journeys took him to locales in what was called Asia Minor. Archeological excavations in cities such as Ephesus, Antioch, or Athens uncovered athletic fields and stadiums that were frequented by citizens as sport spectators.

The Apostle Paul may have been influenced to discover a “Christian” metaphorical connection because the site locations in the classical world had a close connection between sport and religion. The official Web site of the modern Olympic games states that “Olympia, the site of the ancient Olympic Games [had] imposing temples, votive buildings, elaborate shrines . . . Olympia functioned as a meeting place for worship and other religious and political practices as early as the 10th century BC. The central

part of Olympia was dominated by the majestic temple of Zeus, with the temple of Hera parallel to it.”¹⁷

It should not be surprising that Paul would be familiar with sports terminology and use such metaphors in his biblical canonical writings. He seems to have a special affinity for track and field events, boxing, and the actual practice of physical exercise to train the body for competition. In his first letter to the church at Corinth, Paul states in Chapter 9, verse 25 that “everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever” (New International Version [NIV]). Paul also revisits this use of the game metaphor, specifically boxing, to describe the Christian life as competitive training and discipline in his first letter to Timothy, 6:11–12: “But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses” (NIV). The attribute of perseverance in running a race, an admirable quality for any athlete as well as saint, is addressed in Paul’s letter to the church at Philippi: “Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ” (3:12–14, NIV). David J. Williams offers another metaphorical application to these verses as he suggests that Paul is describing a charioteer, who is so intent on the race and its possible pitfalls that the reins (wrapped around his body) must not produce a false move or the race and possibly his life could be lost.¹⁸

That sports metaphors offered in biblical writings seems to have resonated with a primary Greco-Roman audience reveals the close connection historically between sports venues, sports participation, and a latent religious fervor. However, today in the American South the metaphorical notion has been reversed. Religious metaphors now assist in explaining the fervor for fans and participants alike. Church attendance and football game attendance now share a cultural influence in many parts of the American South, a cultural influence endemic to this region and not widely observable elsewhere.

Religion as Metaphor for Sports

So what began in biblical literature as sports metaphors to explain spiritual discipline has now been absconded to make religious (specifically Christian) metaphors create meaning for sports fans and competitors. Shirl J. Hoffman claims “the aspect of sport that so invites a comparison with religion is the intense excitement and the spirit of community it generates.”¹⁹ The extent to which religion has permeated college and professional sports can be seen in many artifactual ways. Although this article focuses primarily on Southern college football and Christian metaphors, the region does not have exclusive rights to the linguistic device. The University of Notre Dame (Roman

Catholic) has obvious religious connections, but the large mural of Jesus Christ on campus with His hands uplifted has been commonly called “Touchdown Jesus” and the reference is not meant nor interpreted on campus as blasphemous or disrespectful. All football teams assimilate a particular metaphor with Catholic implications, especially those who find themselves hopelessly behind in the score with time running out. A quarterback steps back and heaves a long pass in the hope that one of his teammates will catch it and run the ball into the end zone for a touchdown. The pass has become known as the “Hail Mary” maneuver, named for the Catholic prayer of special pleading and intervention. In the 2011 documentary *Old War Skule: The Story of Saturday Night*, there is an iconic view of LSU’s Tiger Stadium at night, brighter than any other building in Baton Rouge, Louisiana and actor John Goodman’s voiceover recites the words of Jesus from Matthew 5: “You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden.”²⁰ The lamenting strains of an African American woman sing out a plea to “Jesus, Jesus, Jesus . . . and LSU.” (Few in this religiously conservative region seem offended by this metaphorical juxtaposition.) A Louisiana pastor, Wright Thompson, posted a video on YouTube²¹ prior to the 2011 Alabama/LSU game that included a blatant home team exegetical interpretation of the Ezekiel 20:29 passage:

“Then I said to them: ‘What is this high place you go to?’ (It is called Bamah to this day.)”²²

Several evangelical Christian groups (Athletes in Action, Baseball Chapel, and Fellowship of Christian Athletes) view sports as a means to spread their brand of Christianity to not merely an American culture but any other culture that has an interest in sports at its core.²³ “Today’s athletes are looked upon as heroes . . . In short, they are worshiped.”²⁴ The mode of dissemination frequently links this brand of Christianity to metaphors of the sports mentality and endeavor.

Chad Gibbs, comedy editor and football fanatic, has published a humorous yet insightful book entitled *God & Football: Faith and Fanaticism in the SEC* that focuses on the widely endorsed notion that fans and alumni for schools in the Southeastern Conference feel that their “faith” can be shared between Christianity on Sunday morning and SEC football on Saturday nights.²⁵ Gibbs further stated in a *Washington Post* guest article that he adheres to the collegiate sect of the football cult in America. “Our services are held on Saturday, leaving Sundays free for us to worship our God without fear of missing the first quarter. . . . Most of us identify more strongly with our team than we do our religion, and for churches, this is a problem they’ll need to address sooner than later.”²⁶ Many SEC football fanatics seem to support Gibbs’ premise and have produced viral videos as well as documentaries to show the fervor of their “faith.” In their motivational video, the University of Tennessee football program references “tradition” but has phrases attached to the football game such as “come in reverence,” “worship the Vols,” and “this is the most important non-important thing in the world.”²⁷

Consideration of these other examples and these artifacts should prove fascinating for religious rhetorical scholars (no matter where they went to school). Many SEC

football programs offer motivational videos that tap into the para-religious culture. LSU's 1:47-minute video is a case in point. It was created by their media department for the October 16, 2010 home game between the LSU Tigers and the visiting McNeese State University Cowboys. Entitled, "It's Saturday Night in Death Valley," the video was shown on the large screens at Tiger Stadium and used intense music, tiger roar sound effects, clips of football scenes, and the community, as well as religious metaphors to rouse the spirits of the LSU home crowd to a fervor that seemed to merge religious passion with pride, loyalty, and resolve for the football game that was yet to come. The video was basically unaltered for its updated showing in October of 2011, with the addition of actual printed text for the religious metaphorical language emblazoned on the screen. The 2012 version, now available on YouTube, has updated video clips inserted for this year's team.

"It's Saturday Night in Death Valley": A Rhetorical Artifact

As all members of the LSU community know full well, the nickname of "Death Valley" is synonymous with the Baton Rouge's campus Tiger Stadium. Public address announcer for all LSU home games, Dan Borne, wrote the narrative for the 1:47-minute video and it was first played after the coin toss leading to the kickoff on October 16, 2010. Here is the transcript of the text (with descriptions of pictures):

It is a pantheon of concrete and steel.

[Picture of the stadium from an aerial view. The stadium switches to a view of the Mississippi River Bridge going into Baton Rouge.]

It is a city that rises defiantly in the Delta, alongside the "father of waters."

[An aerial view of the stadium and surrounding campus buildings shows the lights of the stadium particularly.]

It is the humidity of autumn evenings, the draped stately oaks and broad magnolias.

[Pictures of the stadium, the campus trees, and campus buildings in park settings appear.]

It is haunting . . . and it is LOUD!

[Back to the stadium and scenes of fans yelling]

It is Halloween night and "Cannon blasts."

[A grainy black and white clip shows legendary LSU football player, Billy Cannon, running for a touchdown in 1959; this is a historical event that has reached mythic proportions in the history of LSU football; the *Old War Skule* documentary elaborates on this iconic LSU myth.]

It is a Louisiana "gumbo" of humanity that cheers its Tigers to victory—and destroys the dreams of invading foes.

[Crowd scenes of LSU students and fans; clouds roll in but quickly roll away before the next voiceover.]

Chance of rain is . . . NEVER!

[Quick cuts between football players, coaches, and football plays during the voiceover]

It is the "cathedral" [text appears in 2011] of college football, and "worship" [text appears in 2011] happens here, when the sun finds its home in the western sky.

It is a field of "glory," [text appears in 2011] for sure, but much more than that.

It is a “sacred” [text appears in 2011] place!

It is Saturday Night in “Death Valley.”

[There is an actual tiger roar, a quick clip of the football game, and the screen that has LSU in block letters.]

Explication of Religious Metaphors in Video Artifacts

Four key metaphors stand out in the video artifact: “cathedral,” “worship,” “glory,” and “sacred.” (The following analysis will also note the same religious metaphors used in other Southern motivational videos as well.) Each of these words is packed with religious overtones and imagery.

Bain-Selbo calls the football stadium an example of “sacred space” (also directly mentioned in the LSU motivational video) and “we see that the buildings or spaces are sacred, and fans make a special point of visiting them either on game day or through the year.”²⁸ Statues such as the Georgia Bulldog sit atop a pillar at the front of Sanford Stadium. This area also serves as a sacred gravesite for all of the previous bulldog mascots for the University of Georgia. Michael Novak reminds us that LSU is not the first, nor the only, university to call its stadium a “cathedral.”²⁹

“Cathedral of college football” is quite a grandiose claim, but it uses the metaphor of a major edifice for gathering “worshippers” rather than the implied smaller venues of a “chapel” or a “church.” The word “pantheon” is also used, which historically has mythic religious connections. In ancient Greece, the “pantheon” was a temple edifice for all the gods. “Cathedral” references the 90,000-seat LSU Stadium on the Baton Rouge campus. While both “church” and “cathedral” represent “houses of worship,” the use of “cathedral” implies a bigger, more colossal site for worship with thousands of worshippers in attendance. The use of this term connotes a gathering place for many more people than would normally fit in a church or a chapel. Some of the archetypal features of this term include *popularity* (it seems to resonate with LSU fans who have caused the video to go viral on YouTube) and *transcendence* (watching football games on Saturday nights in Baton Rouge brings commonality to the “religious/sports” experience). Since “ritual” is religious in origin, the faithful fans gather outside of the stadium to watch the players and the band enter the “cathedral” hours before the actual game begins. *Linguistic constructionism* exemplifies prominent experiences that galvanize the fans and the viewers of the game/video and rouse the crowd much like a charismatic church service in its fervor. Without seeming to be blasphemous the “tail-gate” parties offer a “Eucharistic” substitution for ritual worship also. *Learned associations* reveal that there is an influence that seems to not only empower fans and viewers but binds them together. As if attending an ethnic church with “call/response” coordinated feedback, the crowd knows when to utter specific words of cheer and exhortation. I heard about the LSU video from a former student, who like me attended LSU. *Ambiguity* can occur because there is no priest, although some programs might consider a successful head coach equivalent to this position. No sacramental observances exist, unless you count the tailgate parties; the head coach and the

crowd's rehearsed cheers could be referential with ambiguity to liturgical practice in a sports context. *Emotional reactions* from the crowd inspire and demonstrate loud cheers, fulfilling the epithet of the video's text ["It is haunting . . . and it is LOUD!"]. *Provisions for order, unity, and commonality of shared experience* originate in the video that unifies the crowd as well as the team. The implied notion that "God might possibly be on our side" and the oneness of purpose and centeredness of the task at hand seemed to bind LSU fans together.

Auburn University furthers this metaphor by linking the gathering in the "cathedral" for playing football to the gathering of the faithful. With clear connections to Jesus' words in Matthew 18:20 ("For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them," NIV), the Auburn motivational video has a voice-over that intones "wherever two or more Auburn people are gathered together, they look heavenward and say, 'Fight on!'"³⁰

The three other terms with religious reference points (*worship, glory, sacred*) further extend the religious metaphor and its power to create a unique experience of camaraderie and fan fervor for Southern football teams. The trappings of Bible Belt sensitivity permeate the culture of the Deep South, and even in a state as uniquely diverse religiously as Louisiana (Roman Catholic and Southern Baptist majorities) there is unanimity in purpose when the religious verbs and adjectives link to the football team. These terms are *popular* (recognized in the culture), *transcend* the immediate contest of sporting teams to embrace a culture that finds that religious practices are expected (e.g., prayer before meals, prayer before sporting events, etc.) and bring diverse people together who as fans, alumni, or "celebrants" agree to "worship" together at the "sacred" shrine of college football. The religious references begin early as is evident by the many children in the crowd with t-shirts emblazoned with their team's mascot or logo, and faces painted with team colors like the older college students, endorsing the metaphorical notion of *linguistic constructionism* and *learned associations*. The culture of the Deep South has such an embedded, if ambiguous, connection to religious fervor that the use of religious metaphors easily feeds *emotional responsiveness* and the *commonality of this shared experience* of football fanaticism on Saturday nights not only in Baton Rouge but in Tuscaloosa, College Station, Tallahassee, and Knoxville. It is as natural and appropriate to say "grace" before a meal as it is to cheer for the beloved hometown team.

Extending the analysis that applies the seven principles of metaphorical archetypes lends further support for the pre-eminence of Southern college football as a "religion." Bain-Selbo conducted a survey (225 respondents) in 2005 and 2006 and "a little more than 11% of respondents claimed that college football was the place where they experienced the greatest sense of community . . . and college football ranked, on average, just behind, family, friends, and just ahead of church."³¹ Shirl Hoffman has coined a new term (*Sportianity*) to define the *popularity* principle for Southern college football:

Synthesized with the cultural religion of sports is yet another religious impulse of the evangelical-like religion of Sportianity. Having rounded off the sharp, offending

edges of the Christian gospel and watered down its vital doctrines so as not to threaten the presumptions undergirding big time sports, Sportianity has been allowed to serve as public chaplain to the sports establishment.³²

Hoffman picks up on the key religious term of *worship* and acceptable popularity of shared experiences when he further states that “modern Sportians rush to our sports arenas to worship the god of commercialism.”³³

Moore reminds us that “religion is in the lexicon of American football, a fact that suggests how easily religious Americans can entwine the sacred with the secular.”³⁴ The transcendence of the word *sacred* moves out and away from merely the confines of religious worship and community to embrace this cultural experience akin to religious fervor. Prebish lists examples of *linguistic constructionism, learned associations, ambiguity, emotional reactions, and provisions for order, unity and commonality of shared experience*, making the metaphorical association even clearer:

[Houses of worship link to] ballfields, courts, gymnasiums, swimming pools, and other locations of worship in sport...[Seekers of the kingdom equal] sports fanatics and athletes themselves....Ruling patriarchs...include Joe Paterno³⁵ and John Wooden...and sport has saints such as Knute Rockne, Lou Gehrig, Jim Thorpe, and Amos Alonzo Stagg.³⁶

The other key term found in many motivational videos was the term *glory* or its derivative forms (e.g., *glorify*). Such expressions figure prominently in individual athlete commentary. Southern college football with its deep connections to religious expression does not consider overt expressions of religiosity inappropriate generally. Teams with “Tim Tebows” who paint Bible verse references on their faces are embraced and their behaviors accepted, but this may be endemic to the South where the religious metaphorical connections resonate:

Athletes [such as Tim Tebow of the University of Florida]...who refer to their athletic experiences as “praise performances” or “worship experiences” and express a desire to “*glorify* [author’s italics] God” through their athletic performances seem to be headed down the right path by sensing sport’s intrinsic appeal to the spirit.”³⁷

Conclusion

Truth be told, religious metaphors in sports can emerge in places outside of the Deep South and Bible Belt. However, the motivational videos from major college football programs outside of the South do not generally employ religious metaphors; this aspect does seem ubiquitous in the American South. (For example, the University of Oregon and the University of Southern California motivational videos offer no allusion to religious metaphors.³⁸) Prayers before games are pervasive at high school football games in virtually every part of the state of Texas and elsewhere in the Bible Belt region. Even NASCAR races begin with an ecumenical prayer these days. But this religious expression/rhetorical connection does not impact every region of the United States. That the American South embraces this duality for religious expression shows the willingness to imbue sport with religion much like the ancient Greeks or Romans did.

Chad Gibbs said, “It’s something I’m working on, because football, as great as it is, is only a game. And if I truly believe the things I profess, then I should never let the outcome of a game hinder me from serving my God. I’m working on it, but it’s difficult. America is a football nation. Maybe the next time we take a religion survey we’ll be honest enough to admit it.”³⁹ I appreciated Gibbs’ honesty and his perspective taking when he says:

I want to be the kind of person who can enjoy college football without worshiping it, even though I’m not really sure what that means. I know I want to go to games, and I want to scream like a madman, and I want to celebrate victories like I somehow contributed. But I don’t want to wish death or worse on rival fans, and I . . . never, never, ever want a game to keep me from being the person God wants me to be.⁴⁰

Perhaps the significance of rhetorical religious metaphors lies not in the lessening of religious influence on culture in the South, but more about the synthesis of cultural “Christianity” primarily in a less exclusive faith. One does not need to be identified with an acceptable religious denomination or group in order to find a “common faith” with a fellow sports fan. Church identification may be a Southern cultural expectation, but collegiate football identification is far more communal and powerful. Currently, the local church and the local stadium seem to be peacefully coexisting, but the football stadium may be winning out with more converts these days.

Using metaphors to explain the rhetorical connection that fans and athletes have for their favorite college football team may embrace religious fervor, but warnings abound for giving major college sports leaders unaccountable power. Penn State University’s sanctions from the NCAA in 2012 should provide a wake-up call to any other university that begins to worship a coach or a program or an institution with religious attributions. As the *Los Angeles Times* stated, “The larger purpose of the [Penn State] sanctions . . . is to tell universities across the country that there’s a considerable price to pay for letting their mission become subservient to their athletics programs.”⁴¹

Perhaps the phrase “Southerners view sports, especially college football, as a religion” may be perceived as a self-evident cliché. But the language choices and the figures of speech, particularly the metaphors, reveal a para-religious notion of divided devotion. However, rather than embracing separated places of worship, Southern college football fans find encouragement to share their divided religious fervor between the raucous cheers of Saturday night and the hallowed intonations of Sunday morning. Both expressions are culturally acceptable and embraced. The videos, the Facebook and Twitter responses, and the documentaries are reminders that religious metaphors help give “voice” to those who seek assurance and opportunities to celebrate a Higher Power, who just might also like to watch SEC football as well on Saturday night.

Notes

- [1] See: Catherine L. Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion*, 5th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 2012); William J. Baker, *Playing With God: Religion and Modern Sport* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Robert J. Higgs, *God in the Stadium: Sports and Religion in America* (Lexington, KY: The University of

- Kentucky Press, 1995); Shirl J. Hoffman, *Good Game: Christianity and the Culture of Sports* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010); Tom Krattenmaker, *Onward Christian Athletes: Turning Ballparks Into Pulpits and Players Into Preachers* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, Publishers, 2010); R. Laurence Moore, *Touchdown Jesus: The Mixing of Sacred and Secular in American History* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003); Charles S. Prebish, ed., *Religion and Sport: The Meeting of Sacred and Profane* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993); James P. Spradley, ed., *The Nacirema: Readings on American Culture* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 1975).
- [2] Baker, *Playing With God*, 85.
- [3] Eric Bain-Selbo, *Game Day and God: Football, Faith and Politics in the American South* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009), 74.
- [4] Baker, *Playing With God*, 106.
- [5] Edward Tarte, "Football Religion," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k23cLBUBoUQ>, (accessed July 31, 2012).
- [6] Rednex, "Football Is Our Religion (February 4, 2012), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j3wsqle-GAo&feature=related> (accessed July 30, 2012).
- [7] Larry Woiwode, "The Word Made Flesh," *Books & Culture*, July/August 1999, 40.
- [8] Sonja K. Foss, *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration & Practice*, 4th ed. (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 2009), 268.
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- [22] The pastor decided not to mention that "Bamah" ("high place") was in context a place where harlotry occurred. In his own context, Pastor Thompson merely used the Bible verse as a springboard to rally the church-going public for the upcoming game. This is not an unusual practice in the Deep South. This author remembers hearing local college football scores offered during church announcement time when the home team won the day before on Saturday night.
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- [24] Stephen Altroge, *Game Day for the Glory of God: A Guide for Athletes, Fans, & Wannabes* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 25.
- [25] Chad Gibbs, *God & Football: Faith and Fanaticism in the SEC* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010).
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- [27] Scott Colthorpe, "Tradition," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zZuNmeo22oY> (accessed July 31, 2012).
- [28] Bain-Selbo, *Game Day and God*, 17.
- [29] Michael Novak, *The Joy of Sports: Endzones, Bases, Baskets, Balls, and the Consecration of the American Spirit*, Rev. ed. (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1994), 134.
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- [31] Bain-Selbo, *Game Day and God*, 51, 70.
- [32] Hoffman, *Good Game*, 264.
- [33] Ibid., 264.
- [34] Moore, *Touchdown Jesus*, 11.
- [35] Note: However, some "patriarchs" like Joe Paterno can "fall from grace" when scandal ruins their legacy.
- [36]]Prebish, *Religion and Sport*, 58–60.
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- [38] See: "Oregon Motivational: Rose Bowl 2012," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RIMShwCfTxM> (accessed February 19, 2012), and "USC Football—Passion," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQkIRHwlt7m> (accessed April 16, 2012).
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