
OLYMPISM

Extract from a speech delivered by Dr. Fr.M. Messerli, founder member of the Swiss Olympic Committee, at the Commemoration Ceremony the latter's 50th Anniversary on July 14th 1962 in l'Aula of the Lausanne University.

How are we to define this term *Olympism* ? This term has been in common use since about 1912, but does not yet appear in the French dictionaries.

In the Renovator's writings, we have discovered the only interpretation of this term given by him : 'Olympism is an attempt to group in a glorious synthesis all the characteristic principles which contribute to the development of human perfection.' The grouping of principles in a synthesis however, does not provide a definition of the synthesis itself ! What do these principles stand for ?

If we had to define the term Olympism (a delicate and daring feat which is opened to criticisms which we are fully expecting), we would say that it is a 'philosophy aiming at the creation of physical fitness and bodily effort allied to spiritual and intellectual values which contribute to achieve the complete and harmonious development of the individual and contributing to his ultimate perfection'.

A philosophy ? certainly ! For philosophy consists of a series of principles or a synthesis of principles, as stated by de Coubertin, when setting an ideal of perfection or tending to this aim. Are not the aims of Olympism to achieve perfection while combining physical attainments such as speed, skill, strength, powers of endurance, staying power, and combining with these physical qualities, since these are the source of good

health which is an indispensable factor in promoting spiritual and educative development and human equilibrium : for physical fitness is essential to the individual who strives after balanced, cultural and moral development.

At first sight the terms *physical fitness* and *philosophy* might appear contradictory since physical fitness is the outcome of sustained practice of muscular exercises and successive physical efforts practised by young athletes whereas philosophy, the outcome of thought and of wisdom evokes men who are calm, controlled, thoughtful and given to reflection.

This is only an apparent contradiction since the practice of sport is, as a rule, a simple complement to the activity of the individual, a part time occupation which does not exclude the faculty of thinking and indulging in intellectual pursuits : furthermore, sport also includes the science of bodily rest or 'relaxation' according to the modern expression, this entails a complete physical relaxation, particularly conducive to meditation. We also note that the execution of numerous athletic exercises requires complete concentration by the athlete, while the practice of physical exercises is for him a precious source of the spiritual qualities which were prized by the stoic philosophy, such as the quality of courage with which to fight fear. Does not the modern athlete seek-danger in order to dominate his fears, or physical endurance in order to overcome fatigue, or seek obstacles to vanquish difficulty ?

Citius, Altius, Fortius : Faster, Higher, Braver, are the pass words that Rev. Father Henri Didon (1840-1900) of the Dominican order, had chosen for his pupils grouped in athletic clubs ! *Citius, altius, fortius*, the motto adopted by Olympism, which in itself constitutes a full practical programme of philosophy, which anybody can detect, is not only related to the world of sport but applies to life as a means of effecting a gradual improvement in the athlete human status. *Citius, altius, fortius* ; the practical philosophy of the sportsmen whose climax is their participation in the Olympic Games.

Did not philosophers mix with athletes in the gymnasia of the Antiquity ?

Let us recollect that the famous athlete : Milan de Crotone, who lived in the VIth century B.C. and who, on several occasions, was champion of the Games at Olympia, was one of the most assiduous disciples of Pythagore !

Can we find a finer example in our modern times than that of Pierre de Coubertin to prove that the practice of sport and an interest in the principles of philosophy do far from being mutually exclusive but can be complementary to each other and derive from one other ; the former being on occasions the germ of the other. De Coubertin whose name is for ever linked with Olympism, will

stand out in world history as a prominent pedagogue as well as a great humanist. His name can well be mentioned in the same breath as J.-J. Rousseau (1712-1778) and Jean-Henri Pestalozzi (1746-1827) to give only these two examples.

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We have said that 'Olympism is a philosophy aiming at the creation of physical fitness and bodily effort' – but can we call it a cult ? Certainly, since this term expresses a comprehensive unity of manifestations, of feelings, of the performance of actions with the object of serving an ideal, or paying homage to a divinity-which is not the case here. The ideal of Olympism is to contribute to achieve the complete and harmonious development of the individual and to contribute to his ultimate perfection.

Several sanctuaries, including the temple of Zeus. were situated within the sacred precincts of Olympia where the famous Games of Antiquity were held. Later, de Coubertin renovated the Games of our modern era. Although the modern stadia have no shrines of worship, they often give the impression that they have, especially at the time of the celebrations of the Olympic Games when the stadia seem to assume the character of churches, cathedrals, modern shrines erected to the cult and glory of sport. This is a cult not practised by the athletes only but by the spectators who, whether believers or not, represent and practise the various religions throughout the world ; for Olympism does not aim at suppression or replacing religious beliefs but tends to unite in brotherhood the representatives of all the nations of the world, of all races, all religions, in its work of mutual understanding and the promotion of peace and friendship among the peoples.

A religion, implying the worship of one or several deities. may also, apart from the aspect of its deism, include the practice of the principles which help to attain this 'synthesis of ideals', according to de Coubertin's definition.

De Coubertin in a 'message from Olympia to sporting youth of all nations' on the 17th of August 1927 drew a parallel between sport and religion when he wrote : 'our wish in restoring an institution that originated twenty-five centuries ago is to enable you to become once more adepts of the religion of sport in the manner conceived by the illustrious ancestors of old.' This, if I am not mistaken, is the only occasion when the Renovator of the Games used the term religion in referring to sport.

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Does this permit Olympism to be considered as a religion or its equivalent, or to assimilate the Olympic Games to a cult ? A modern religion without deities which does

not exclude other religious beliefs ! which does not imply deities but which honour and acclaim the Olympic Champions as the 'gods of the stadia' as they are called nowadays.

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Synthesis of principles, philosophy, religion, cult, call it what you like, one fact remains : no antique tradition has ever been so brilliantly restored, no quadrenial commemoration such as the Olympic Games can arise such an outstanding world enthusiasm.

We attribute this great success to the institution of an independent autonomous

International Olympic Committee, free of all political and governmental influence, of all political ideology or any others, leading the Olympic Movement in the highest principles and the broadest views.

Thanks to its independence, the International Olympic Committee has been able to maintain its prestige and to hold the celebration of the quadrenial Games with a growing popularity, in spite of two cataclysms of unprecedented violence experienced at the time of the two world wars, when most international institutions such as the League of Nations for instance, based on politics, went under and did not survive.