

Editorial Preface

Throughout its extensive history, sport has served government, state, political and economic interests. It has variously had influences on military preparedness, national identity, gendered power structures and economic development. Despite popular belief, sport and physical activity have never operated independently of social, economic and political forces, and have had, over the last century, significant impacts on the cultural development of many nations. Despite its relevance on so many levels, one of the most under-researched areas is the role of sport in the service of religions. Whereas researchers have covered areas such as Muscular Christianity and the influence of the Christian religion on US professional and college sports, few scholars have published on the historical and contemporary role of sport and physical activity in other world religions. More specifically, researchers have not focused on sport's place in sustaining and perpetuating religious exclusivity in the face of overwhelming religious opposition. These papers are an attempt to redress this dearth of research and analyse the place of sport in a variety of religious and ethnic contexts.

The work presented in this issue is part of a growing effort to understand the place of sport in religious communities, particularly those religious communities that are generally defined as 'minority'. When examining sport and religion, many try to ascribe religious qualities to sport, and understand physical and spectating practices as evidence that sport is a 'religion' for many. Beyond that, most studies of sport and religion focus on the *integrative* nature of sport, and seek to examine the way that sport can bring disparate communities together. There is an abundance of material that suggests that sport has effectively operated within a variety of societies to integrate and assimilate, yet this research often overlooks the, at times, active resistance to the domination of these groups. Thus, much of the research on sport and religion remains one-dimensional and reproduces widely held myths about sport as social integrator. Of further interest is the means by which sport may perpetuate *differences* between groups. Few have focussed on religion in sport in the maintenance of minority identities or in terms of resistance to dominant ideologies and cultural practices. This issue of *International Sports Studies* examines the role of sport as a mechanism of *maintaining* social distinctions. This is, of course, not to say that sport has been the sole mechanism in these practices, indeed, the significance of sport may, at times, be overemphasised. Yet, sport is often dismissed as apolitical, if not trivial, and thus the cultural significance of sports events, clubs and leagues are often overlooked. What is important is that sport is an area of society that provides communities with the opportunity to express their identities, be they religious, ethnic, cultural, gendered or national, though it is not the best, the most effective, nor is it even the most popular mechanism. The authors recognise, however, that as sport is integrated into societies, it must also have its part to play in the organisation, maintenance and resistance that occurs within societies.

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