

# Selling Sport and Religion in American Society: Bishop Sheil and the Catholic Youth Organization

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This study analyzed the role of religion and its effect on sporting practices. More specifically, it traces the career of Bishop Bernard J. Sheil, the alleged founder of the Catholic Youth Organization, whose social activism and promotion of sporting enterprises made him an international political figure during the decades surrounding World War II.

The analysis disputes the primacy of Sheil's role as the CYO founder, investigates the rapid expansion of its program to international proportions, and examines the assimilation of ethnic, class, race, and gender groups through sport and social programs.

Pre-eminent among such programs, boxing, in particular, appealed to working class males and their ethnic supporters. Operating in conjunction with Arch Ward, the Catholic sports editor of the powerful *Chicago Tribune*, the boxing program enabled Bishop Sheil to bridge social gaps and political factions during the Depression. By providing college scholarships, material goods, free medical care, and international adventures, CYO programs fostered the perception of sport as a means to social mobility, while they reinforced the working class value of physical prowess.

The sport programs, combined with Sheil's political activities, produced the perception of him as a liberal champion of the working class. By the late 1940s Sheil's social programs included African-Americans, Jews, Puerto Ricans, American Indians, and Nisei, as well as European operations. His contacts reached both ends of the political spectrum, and won him appointment to national committees and international commissions. Despite such status and prestige, Sheil's career within the church faced a sudden and abrupt halt. Upon his self-imposed retirement in 1953, the CYO faded to become an inconsequential player on the world stage.

The study concludes that the rise of Sheil and the CYO during the tenuous years of the Depression and World War II served a functional role in American society. Under the framework of sports and social services, the CYO merged ethnic working class values and addressed racial concerns by uniting potentially antagonistic groups within the established political system. By requiring oaths of allegiance to God and country, religion thus transcended variables of class, race, and ethnicity while it produced loyal Americans.