

The Eternal Present of Sport: Rethinking Sport and Religion

By Daniel A. Grano. Published 2017 by Temple University Press, Philadelphia, PA. 286 pp. ISBN: 9781439912805

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The title of this book intrigued me since I have a keen interest in religion and sport, from both a cultural standpoint as well as a legal view. Unfortunately, this book premises itself as a book about sport and religion, but there is very little coverage of the concept of their relationship. There are short discussions that seem out of place and disrupt the flow of the discussion of sport, but one is left with a sense that the author fell short of the title and purpose for this book.

The book begins with a 28-page introduction, which is the primary discussion of religion and sport. The author, Daniel A. Grano, introduces the main religious concepts of witnessing and transcendence, which is supposed to help us understand the two premises of the book:

(1) At present, elite televised sport is in a moment of conjuncture in which conflicts inherent to several of its most foundational religious (or, as I define them shortly, “theological”) images and tropes are becoming visible and crystallizing around points of rupture and (2) processes of historical change related to these ruptures illustrate how sport is a context that produces uniquely powerful religious antagonisms and transmits them across an interrelated set of cultural practices and institutions. (p. 3)

Grano goes on to rightly discuss the concept (especially if you have seen European football fans view their favorite team’s game) that “sport’s capacity to ritualistically transport adherents out of the profane patterns of everyday life and into the sacred time of live events” (p. 4). This is the “religious” concept that most people can relate to when thinking of sport and its cultural context as a sacred or religious experience.

One very telling and almost prophetic discussion Grano has in the introduction, Chapter 1, is the concept that sport, as a “negative theology” and part of both culture and politics and the idea that “sport is now a *central political issue* in the social conflicts of our time” (p. 13). This almost portends the political action of Colin Kaepernick and the subsequent NFL national-anthem protest. The concept of religion is essentially social, cultural, and political in Grano’s view and that of those he cites. The viewpoint of most of the authors cited is markedly anticapitalistic in nature, essentially seeing elite sport as “a cover for its actual dramatizations of capitalistic violence” (p. 19), as Grano describes one cited author’s interpretation of sport in the Western world. This seems to be the interpretation of sport by many culturalists and sociologists as they examine sport,

especially at the elite level, ascribing some sinister motive in the creation and playing of elite sport.

As the rest of the book begins in Chapter 2, Grano really begins to show that he is best as a writer when it comes to the telling of history and interpretation of that history. Chapter 2, titled “Greatest Ever: Eternity, Forgetting, and Obsolescence,” is a discussion of how we as both sport fans and the media in particular seem to build up our heroes, tear them down, and then forget them (except for a few). Grano does a great job of analyzing the phenomenal Usain Bolt and his amazing dominance of the Olympic sprint events from 2008 to 2016. An example of the premise of the title of this chapter is Grano’s discussion of Bolt’s career: “In the four-year gaps between 2008, 2012, and 2016 athletes can be assigned eternal status, risk losing it, regain it, and risk losing it again, as the very continuum of human advancement they reveal also overtakes them” (p. 31). This is the type of discussion that makes this book interesting to read. As a sport fan, I find that this is the frustration of many fans, and the way that the media always try to create drama in sport and not just let sport be enjoyed as a moment in time, enjoy the “temporal series,” as the author describes it, that the evolution of the human body and technology (training, nutrition, drugs, etc.) presents us as fans.

As Grano shifts to a discussion of the advancement of the human body, as well as other factors discussed in a later chapter, the focus becomes more on how generationally, we seem to forget that there is advancement in the way the athletic body has developed over time and that, generationally, one really cannot compare one “great” to another. In citing Frank DeFord and another author, we have a tendency to “bow to the numbers and worship the immediate” (p. 38), which to Grano, is unfair to past athletes. A great quote that Grano uses from DeFord, illustrating the title of the chapter is, “In sport it is an article of faith that somebody paints a better Sistine Chapel ceiling about every other weekend” (p. 38).

Part Two of Chapter 2 is an interesting discussion of the historic and manipulative nature of the NFL films produced to highlight their top 100 players—which are produced in another film on a regular basis (strengthening Grano’s premise of eternity, forgetting, and obsolescence). It seems the central theme for this section of the chapter is that “the underlying logic of the production process [and the NFL is a master of this]—the evolutionary premise behind constantly replaceable bodies and legacies—remains largely unexamined, accepted as an ahistorical reality” (p. 55). Grano is essentially examining the motives and tactics of the major sport organizations in their presentation of history, as well as giving the historical information that sport thrives on.

Chapter 3 of the book is an in-depth analysis of instant replay, with both an interesting historical analysis and a discussion of how it relates to the evolution of sport broadcasting. Grano argues that “the basis of replay’s importance [is that] it stops the flow of live time, alters the ways in which we see elite sport, and in doing so creates basic conditions for struggling over issues of historical authority, visual evidence, and present-oriented action” (p. 67). As he conducts the impact analysis of replay, he purposes replay as the “objective” arbiter of perceptual disputes” (p. 69). This is essentially its original purpose, as well as its entertainment value; while Grano goes on to try to impugn a religious “witnessing” of replay, he does also give other authors’ opinion that replay acts essentially as a mechanical referee to supplement human fallibility in adjudicating questionable calls. The majority of