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Sport and Christianity in American Cinema: ‘the beloved grew fat and kicked’

(Deuteronomy 32:15)

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Introduction

Lord, we know our lives are not about football, but we do thank you for allowing us to play tonight.

Facing the Giants (Alex Kendrick, 2006)

Christianity has been an enduring feature of films featuring sports or sporting figures since the early twentieth century, such that religious icons, references and rituals have now become naturalised as familiar and recurring presences in the cinema. Recent Christian drama films such as the American football-themed *Facing the Giants* (2006) and the surfing biopic *Soul Surfer* (2011), have employed the emotive and seductive qualities of the mainstream sports film to affirm Christian themes. They each remind us that sport is a powerful vehicle for the promotion of faith-based narratives; while offering the considerable challenges of sporting competition, the drive to success and its realization by characters who foreground their Christian belief, may appear to provide convincing evidence to some of the importance of Christian faith.

Film, as a form that is characterized by its ability to convincingly capture aspects of the world around us, also responds to societal developments, including the manner through which sport and Christianity have interconnected historically. For administrators and promoters of particular sports, conscious that they were engaged with a cultural form viewed at times with considerable suspicion, Christianity provided an important means of legitimizing sport and its importance in society, a feature reflected in particular in American films featuring sport from the early twentieth century. This process took a number of forms including the trope of the boxer-and-the-priest and the manner through which athletes themselves appeared to incorporate aspects of Christian figures. Both sport and Christianity are also central supporting elements for a core ideology in American life, the American Dream, and this is

apparent in one of the most popular and recurring trajectories found within the American Sports film. Through a close reading of relevant film texts, this essay will map the developing relationship between sport and Christianity as revealed in American cinema.

Cinema and Religion

As has occurred with sport (to which we will return shortly), cinema has come to hold a crucial role in people's lives, a role that has at times been compared with religion. Indeed, Andrew Sarris (1998: 15) has described most Hollywood films by the 1930s as 'semi-religious light shows built around the rituals of family and courtship'. This focus on the ritual function of film has preoccupied one major strand of critical discourse concerning the emergence of genres in cinema with Rick Altman (1984: 9) contending that:

By choosing the films it would patronize, the audience revealed its preferences and its beliefs, thus inducing Hollywood studios to produce films reflecting its desires. Participation in the genre film experience thus reinforces spectator expectations and desires. Far from being limited to mere entertainment, filmgoing offers a satisfaction more akin to that associated with established religion.

This view of cinema as offering an experience comparable to that provided by religion has also been expressed by screenwriter Paul Schrader (1972: 8) (screenwriter of *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988)) who described both the cinema — particularly via what he calls a 'transcendental style' — and religion as capable of bringing 'man as close to the ineffable, invisible and unknowable as words, images, and ideas can take him'. Equally, for S. Brent Plate (2008: 2-3) in his important study of the relationship between film and religion:

Religion and film are akin. They both function by recreating the known world and then presenting that alternative version of the world to their viewers/worshippers. Religions and films each create alternate worlds utilising the raw materials of space and time and elements, bending them in new ways and forcing them to fit particular standards and desires. Film does this through camera angles and movements, framing devices, lighting, costume, acting, editing and other aspects of production. Religions achieve this through setting apart particular objects and periods of time and deeming them 'sacred', through attention to specially charged objects (symbols), through the telling of stories (myths) and by gathering people together to focus on some particular event (ritual). The result of both religion and film is a re-created world: a world of recreation, a world of fantasy, a world of ideology, a world we may long to live in or avoid at all costs. As an alternative world is presented at the altar and on the screen, that projected world is connected to the world of the everyday, and boundaries, to a degree, become crossable.

Partly due to the parallels Plate identifies, religion and religious figures have featured prominently throughout cinema's history, including within films featuring sport and sporting figures. Indeed, as Melanie J. Wright (2006: 2) notes in a further study of the relationship between these two major forces in modern life, despite concerns expressed by religious figures regarding the cinema particularly in the first half of the twentieth century, 'Religion has not been displaced by a new medium: it has colonised it, and has found itself challenged and altered in the course of the encounter'. Religious icons, references and rituals have become such a recurring part of popular cinema that their presence is arguably overlooked by many filmgoers. This also applies to films featuring sport which regularly feature athletes

seeking inspiration or support in prayers before events or through the various religious icons they wear.

Christianity and Sport in American Life

The prominence of Christianity, particularly in Hollywood depictions of sport (by far the most numerous and influential)¹ is not surprising given the association of Christianity with sport in American life. This relationship is by no means coincidental and reflects distinct aspects of the history of sport and its development in the Western world. While sport has come to occupy a place in American life – and in many other societies across the world – comparable to that taken by religion in the past (Forbes and Mahan : 163),² this development was by no means straightforward or uncomplicated and the rise in popularity of sport faced considerable challenges. Indeed, the codification and institutionalisation of sport, including the formalisation of rules, and the establishment of national and regional sporting associations and authorities that took place in the nineteenth century, was part of an attempt to control and ameliorate concerns and suspicions regarding sporting activities themselves. Sport was viewed with considerable suspicion in this period and well into the twentieth century, particularly among the establishment of Europe and the United States who often regarded it as a valueless distraction associated with a range of vices including drinking, gambling and violence and ‘at worst a manifestation of cultural decline and barbarism’ (Gruneau, 1993: 86). However, sport would nonetheless become increasingly important for this same establishment, its cultivation and continuity. The development of modernity and

¹ As noted by Scott Robert Olson, ‘Worldwide, audiences are 100 times more likely to see a Hollywood film than see a European film ... Hollywood satisfies 70% of international demand for television narrative and 80% of demand for feature films’ (1999: 23).

² For Ellis Cashmore, sport, in a manner comparable to religion historically, has become ‘loaded with symbolism, imagery, myths, rituals; in short, the meaning-making apparatus that we associate with any other area of cultural life’ (Cashmore, 2000: ix).

capitalism, and the attendant problems they gave rise to, including the fragmentation and attenuation of traditional communities and beliefs, contributed to a reevaluation of sport and the role that it might play in society. In this context, issues of personal and social advancement became increasingly important and sport was deemed to have an important role to play in their development. Sport's role in these respects has been traced through the influence of British public schools and imperialism, and French romanticism in the 19th century (Holt, 1990: 74-85).

However, in order to 'cleanse' sport of its decadent associations, Christianity was employed as a crucial legitimizer of its importance. This development is most evident in the nineteenth century in the 'muscular Christianity' tradition that emerged in the public schools of Victorian Britain and spread across the world and saw in sport a means of instilling Christian principles allied to a vigorous masculinity in young men (Watson et al, 2005). The influence of these developments would eventually (following initial resistance) become evident in the United States where the growing realization of the importance of sport, particularly in often religious run educational institutions, was linked to fears around national weakness and a belief in the ability of sport to produce men of action (Streible, 2008; Putney, 2003). Particularly from the 1880s onwards, with the popularisation of intercollegiate competitions in boat racing and subsequently baseball, athletics and American football, sport came to play an increasingly prominent role in American society and culture. For those in positions of authority, sports became much more than diversions from study; as in the development of sport in the British public school system, they were promoted as a means of instilling discipline, proper Christian values, and imparting leadership skills and an appreciation of the value of teamwork in students while affirming the social barriers that distinguished these students from working-class men (Corn and Goldstein, 1993; Putney, 2001).

Sport and Christianity in American Film

This nineteenth century background to the emergence of sport, and the role of Christianity in legitimizing and affirming its significance, is important to consider when we reflect on the depiction of sport and Christianity in film. Its relevance is evident in a series of films concerned with saving street children from a seemingly inevitable life of crime that emerged in the mid-1930s. These films owed much to the ‘muscular Christianity’ tradition referred to already and a relevant example is the classic gangster film *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938) in which Father Connelly (Pat O’Brien) employs basketball to take children in his parish off the streets and help them ‘straighten out’, enlisting the assistance of local gangster Rocky Sullivan (James Cagney) to teach them to play ‘according to the rules’. The following year, Spencer Tracy was awarded an Academy Award as Best Actor for his role as Father Flanagan in *Boys Town* (1938), a film concerning a real-life rural reform school in which boxing was employed to produce ‘sturdy young bodies and stout young hearts’ (Boddy, 2008: 104). In *Boys Town*, when arguments break out between boys, they are settled according to the rules of boxing; as Father Flanagan remarks, ‘all fights here are according to Hoyle, and they’re in the ring’. An Irish-American priest featured again in Leo McCarey’s *Bells of St Mary’s* (1945), where Father Charles ‘Chuck’ O’Malley (Bing Crosby) and Mother Superior, Mary Benedict (Ingrid Bergman) also employ boxing to cultivate discipline among the children in their care. In these films, Christianity and Christian figures play a similar role to that in the nineteenth century; they provide authority and legitimation for the increasing popularization of sport in American life through its employment towards apparently Christian ends.

Indeed, occasionally Christian figures find words of inspiration in the Bible for their sporting actions. In *Trouble Along the Way* (1953), Father Burke (Charles Coburn), rector of small Catholic St. Anthony's college which is in debt to the tune of over \$170, 000 decides the only way out of debt is to establish a successful football programme. He justifies his belief with reference to lines from the Bible (Deuteronomy 32:15): 'the beloved grew fat and kicked', and enlists former disgraced football coach 'of some of the country's leading universities' Steven Williams (John Wayne) to realize his ambition. Williams does not believe, however, that the team can be successful and illegally enlists pro-footballers. The rector is appalled when he finds out but the school is saved nonetheless when the church decides to continue funding it despite the debt.

As in many other films of the era that feature Christian figures, a heavy emphasis is apparent within *Trouble Along the Way* on Christian faith as the means to address whatever challenges are faced: As Father Burke remarks at one point (quoting Jesus (Mathew 8:26)): 'Why are ye fearful, oh ye of little faith?' Later still he reassures Williams, despite his considerable doubts concerning the feasibility of a successful football programme at St. Anthony's, 'Now, I'm sure with a little faith, all of our other difficulties will disappear'. And so, it would seem to pass, even if it is the generous intervention of the Church rather than sport that ensures the college remains open.

In this emphasis, *Trouble Along the Way* may appear to depart somewhat from the more familiar trajectory of the American sport film by which sport often appears to provide utopian possibilities that can transcend the sometimes tarnished and challenging present, and past, circumstances of those who engage in sporting activities or follow those who are (Crosson,

2013: 157-171).³ We will return to this trajectory shortly but for now I would like to consider this departure as not atypical of the time in which *Trouble Along the Way* was made and released and indeed reflecting a transitional phase in the representation of sport in American film. Furthermore, despite the corrupt actions of Williams, the football programme at St. Anthony's is not discontinued. By the film's close, while Father Burke retires, his final act is to ensure that a reformed Williams continues for at least another year as football coach – thanks to the Latin fine print on his contract.

A further film from the 1950s that also employs a Christian figure while acknowledging negative aspects to sporting life is *Angels in the Outfield* (1951), a film remade under the same title in 1994. While both films stress the importance of Christian faith, the original has as a central focus a foul-mouthed baseball coach, Guffy McGovern (Paul Douglas) who is visited by an angel—sent on behalf of archangel Gabriel—to complain of the coach's use of foul language; as the angel remarks to McGovern 'You've been busting snoots ... polluting the air with your foul talk long enough ... Lay off swearing and fighting, and I'll win you some ball games. I might even win you a pennant.' In return for refraining from foul language and bad behavior the angel, along with his 'boys' (angelic former players), assists the coach's team on an unlikely winning run.⁴

What we are witnessing in films such as *Trouble Along the Way* and *Angels in the Outfield* is the negotiation in film of the movement of sport to the centre of American life, a movement often assisted by the imprimatur of Christianity and Christian figures. A further example of

³ As David Rowe has summarised (1998: 355), in Hollywood sports films customarily 'all manner of social, structural, and cultural conflicts and divisions are resolved through the fantastic agency of sports'.

⁴ Significantly, bad language is less a focus of the 1994 remake; here angels respond to a young boy's prayers and Christian faith is foregrounded centrally. As the foster-mother of the home in which the young boy lives remarks at one point in the film, 'you've got to have faith, you've got to believe, you've got to look inside yourself - the footprints of an angel are love, and where there is love, miraculous things can happen. I've seen it'.

this negotiation is evident in *The Jackie Robinson Story* (1950), featuring the legendary and ground-breaking African American baseball player himself in the lead role. Robinson, as well as been one of the greatest baseball players of his generation, was also the first African American in the modern era to play Major League baseball in the United States, successfully crossing the baseball 'colour line' when he lined out for the first time for the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947. Robinson's decision to join the Dodgers is informed significantly by religious considerations, at least according to its representation in Alfred E. Green's 1950 film. When he asks his mother for advice, she encourages him to seek guidance from his local Minister, which Robinson duly does. For the Minister, Robinson's decision is a big thing not just for the player himself but 'for the whole coloured people', and his role as a representative of the African American community is a further prominent focus of the film. However, the role here of this religious figure in ultimately encouraging Robinson to cross the colour line assists again in the legitimization of his decision to pursue a career in sport.

A sport particularly in need of religion's imprimatur was boxing, a sport banned in much of the United States until the early twentieth century and yet one of the most popular sports featured particularly in American cinema, with the sub-genre's roots lying in the very earliest years of film production (Streible, 2008). However, boxing in film has provided an ambiguous, yet revelatory, picture of sport in society, often focusing on the dark and corrupt aspects of this sport, but also (particularly in more recent decades) seeing in it an opportunity for those marginalised and less fortunate to realise the American Dream (Grindon, 1996). In the early to mid-twentieth century however, it was the darker aspects that were often emphasized in film, though a process is apparent whereby religion (as in the nineteenth century) assisted in its legitimization.

Kasia Boddy has identified a recurring trope in American cinema of the 'Boxer-and-the-Priest' (Boddy, 2008: 268), which came to prominence from the 1930s onwards. Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* features a parodic reference, told to central protagonist Humbert by Charlotte Haze, to this trope: 'The boxer had fallen extremely low when he met the good old priest (who had been a boxer himself in his robust youth and could still slug a sinner)' (Quoted in Boddy: 268). The theme of the-boxer-and-the-priest is evident in one of the most influential American films of the 1950s, *On the Waterfront* (1954) where the local priest, Father Barry (Karl Malden), provides the moral centre and conscience for a film concerning ex-boxer Terry Malloy (Marlon Brando) who is seduced into a life of crime working for the mob on the docks. In a central sequence Malloy attempts to confess to his involvement in the death of a dockworker, which Father Barry refuses to hear in the confessional. In a direct challenge to Malloy, the world of sport and the necessity to do the right thing are contrasted as Malloy is challenged by Father Barry to identify the man responsible for the killing:

Malloy

But, you know, if I spill, my life ain't worth a nickel.

Father Barry

And how much is your soul worth if you don't?

Malloy

They're askin' me to put the finger on my own brother. Johnny Friendly used to take me to ball games when I was a kid.

Father Barry

‘Ball games.’ Don’t break my heart. I wouldn’t care if he gave you a life pass to the Polo Grounds. So you’ve got a brother, eh? Let me tell you something: You’ve got some other brothers. And they’re getting’ the short end ... while your Johnny’s getting mustard on his face at the Polo Grounds. Ball games! Listen. If I were you, I would walk right...

Never mind. I’m not asking you to do anything. It’s your own conscience that’s got to do the asking.

Malloy

‘Conscience.’ That stuff ... That stuff can drive you nuts.

Nevertheless, as in *Trouble Along the Way* it is ultimately not sport that is condemned but rather its corruption by those who won’t play by the rules. While Father Barry has himself a sporting background as ‘a pretty good ball player and something of an amateur boxer in his college days’ (Schulberg, 1988: 43), in what has become one of the most quoted sequences in cinema history, it is the lost potential for success that sport might have offered him that is most regretted by Malloy. His boxing career ended prematurely after he was convinced by his brother Charley to take a dive for the mob:

You remember that night in the Garden, you came down to my dressin’ room ... and said, ‘Kid, this ain’t your night. We’re goin’ for the price on Wilson?’ You remember that? ... I coulda taken Wilson apart. So what happens? He gets the title shot outdoors in a ballpark ... and what do I get? A one-way ticket to Palookaville. You was my brother, Charley. You shoulda looked out for me a little bit ... I coulda had class. I coulda been a contender. I coulda been somebody... instead of a bum ...

A further film from the 1950s that also exhibits the boxer-and-the-priest trope is seminal director John Ford's most commercially successful film, *The Quiet Man* (1952).⁵ Indeed, *The Quiet Man* actually includes two 'priests', one Protestant, one Catholic, in a work which features John Wayne in the central role of Irish-American boxer Sean Thornton who returns to Ireland in search of his ancestral home. Local Protestant Minister Reverend Playfair (Arthur Shields) had boxed in his youth, and both he and the Parish Priest, Father Lonergan (Ward Bond), play crucial roles in facilitating the recovery (and eventual integration into a new community) of the traumatized Thornton after his accidental killing of an opponent in the ring in the United States.

Significantly, fighting has a crucial role to play in this process. A core theme of *The Quiet Man* is the rehabilitation of the boxer, and arguably boxing itself, facilitated by the religious figures in this community. Thornton is reluctant to fight again after his final traumatic fight in the ring, despite being provoked repeatedly by a local farmer, Squire 'Red' Will Danaher (played by former professional boxer Victor McLaglen), his wife's brother who refuses to part with her dowry. However, with the assistance and implicit encouragement of former boxer Reverend Playfair (the only local person who is aware of Thornton's boxing past), he eventually confronts Danaher to demand the return of the dowry leading to one of the longest fight sequences in cinema. While fought over several miles of Irish countryside rather than in the ring, there are clear attempts to regulate the contest within the rules of boxing, with local bookmaker and matchmaker, Michaleen Oge Flynn (Barry Fitzgerald), declaring at one point (when others try to get involved), 'This is a private fight. The Marquis of Queensbury rules will be observed on all occasions'. By the end of the fight, Thornton gains Danaher's respect

⁵ Indeed, the popularity of *The Quiet Man* is evident in the trailer of *Trouble Along the Way* which describes Wayne as 'The Quiet Man in love with trouble'. Trailer available on Youtube at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=moExVXryj0A>> (accessed 10 September 2014)

(‘You know, Yank. I’ve taken quite a likin’ to you’ he remarks) and the two are pictured arm in arm on their way to Thornton’s house for dinner. It would seem that the boxer and boxing, with the assistance of the local Catholic priest and Protestant minister, have been rehabilitated.

The boxer-and-the-priest trope (if somewhat reworked as the boxing-trainer and the priest) received its most memorable recent appearance in Clint Eastwood’s Oscar winning film *Million Dollar Baby*. The film was, however, one of the most controversial Oscar winners of recent years. The most controversial aspect of *Million Dollar Baby* was the unsettling and highly emotionally charged final part of the film. Though initially reluctant, trainer Frankie Dunn (played by Eastwood) eventually agrees to manage female boxer, Maggie Fitzgerald (Hilary Swank), convinced in particular by the persistence and belief in her of his assistant, Eddie Scrap-Iron Dupris (Morgan Freeman), in the run-down gym he owns. Fitzgerald enjoys considerable success at first in the ring under Dunn’s management and finally gets a chance to fight for the World Welterweight Championship. However in the fight itself against the reigning champion Billie ‘The Blue Bear’ (Lucia Rijker) she is seriously injured by an illegal blow from her opponent that leaves her with an acute spinal cord injury and little hope of full recovery. Unable to live with the severely restricted mobility she is likely to endure for the remainder of her life, Fitzgerald begs Dunn to end her life which he eventually, if reluctantly, does.

Prior to assisting Fitzgerald to end her life, Dunn seeks advice from his local priest, Father Horvak (Brían O’Byrne), a figure with whom Dunn discusses questions of faith and seeks advice from on a number of occasions during the film. Significantly the scene concerned is shot inside Father Horvak’s church, beginning with the camera tracking up the central aisle to

where Dunn and Father Horvak sit, capturing the altar, crucifix, religious iconography and various religious signifiers as we approach the two already in conversation. The placing of this scene inside the church and the rendering of religious icons in this manner was a significant change from the original screenplay; in Paul Haggis' *Million Dollar Baby: Rope Burns*, this is an exterior scene which takes place on the steps of the church rather than indoors (Haggis, [n.d.]: 113). The choice of an interior location emphasizes the religious context which Frankie has placed himself within in an attempt to come to terms with Fitzgerald's request to die. It is also the context he will clearly have to step outside to agree to her request. As the conversation develops between the two, it is clear in the anguished responses of Frankie that he is contemplating a step beyond his religious faith:

Father Horvak: You can't do it, you know that.

Frankie: I do, Father. You don't know how thick she is, how hard it was to train her. Other fighters would do exactly what you say to them and she'd ask, 'why this' and 'why that' and do it her own way, anyway. How she fought for the title ... Wasn't by anything, it wasn't by listening to me. But now she wants to die and I just want to keep her with me. And I swear to God, Father, it's committing a sin by doing it. By keeping her alive, I'm killing her. Do you know what I mean? How do I get around that?

Father Horvak: You don't. You step aside, Frankie. You leave it with God.

Frankie: She's not asking for God's help. She's asking for mine.

Father Horvak: Frankie, I've seen you at mass almost every day for 23 years. The only person who comes to church that much is the kind who can't forgive himself for something. Whatever sins you're carrying, they're nothing compared to this. Forget

about God or Heaven and Hell. If you do this thing, you'll be lost, somewhere so deep, you'll never find yourself again.

While Frankie's decision to assist Fitzgerald with ending her life is clearly at odds with Christian doctrine (and was the subject of considerable criticism on the film's release) (Davis, 2005), this controversial aspect of *Million Dollar Baby* is arguably counterbalanced by a Christian message at the heart of the film. Sharon Roubach has contended that while the film represents euthanasia as an act of mercy and love, it is nonetheless a work with a central Christian message based on the image of the Holy Trinity, an aspect of Catholic faith which is foregrounded within the film in an earlier discussion between Frankie and his priest:

Father Horvak: What's confusing you this week?

Frankie: Same old one God, three gods.

Father Horvak: Frankie, most people figure out in kindergarten, it's all about faith.

Frankie: Is it sort of like snap, crackle and pop all rolled up in one big box?

Father Horvak: You're standing outside my church comparing God to Rice Crispies? The only reason you come to mass everyday is to wind me up. It's not going to happen this morning.

Frankie: Well, I'm confused.

Father Horvak: No you're not,

Frankie: Yes I am.

Father Horvak: Then here is your answer: there is one God. Anything else? 'Cause I'm busy.

Frankie: What about the Holy Ghost?

Father Horvak: He's the expression of God's love.

Frankie: And Jesus?

Father Horvak: Son of God. Don't play stupid.

Frankie: What is he then; does that make him a demi-God?

Father Horvak: There are no demi-gods, you fucking pagan.

This unusual, and in its closing somewhat irreverent consideration of a central article of faith within Christianity, may point to a larger message within the film as a whole in which the three main characters themselves personify aspects of the Holy Trinity. For Roubach (2007):

Million Dollar Baby is a boxing movie that uses imagery associated with the Holy Trinity – personified by the film's three protagonists [Frank Dunn (Clint Eastwood) as God the Father; Maggie Fitzgerald (Hilary Swank) as 'Like Jesus', and Eddie Scrap-Iron Dupris (Morgan Freeman) as 'the Holy Ghost'] – to put forth a view that the essence of Christianity relates to belief and love. The Trinity also lends itself as a medium for Eastwood's reflections of notions of home and family, through a comparison between biological dysfunctional families and human bonds based on love and compassion.

Roubach's reading of *Million Dollar Baby* identifies a further recurring aspect of the relationship between sport and Christianity as depicted in American film. The extent to which sporting figures may themselves personify or are paralleled with Christian figures. Indeed, occasionally Christian figures have 'crossed the ropes' to participate in sporting events themselves. John Derek played Episcopalian minister Gil Allen in *The Leather Saint* (1956) who fights professionally (unknown to his superiors), under the fight name 'Kid Sunday', to earn money to buy rehabilitation equipment for a children's hospital in his parish. *The*

Leather Saint anticipated in some respects the more recent film, *Nacho Libre* (2006), a work based on the true story of a Mexican priest, Rev. Sergio Gutiérrez Benítez or Fray Tormenta ('Friar Storm'), who competed as a masked luchador, or Lucha libre (free wrestling) wrestler for 23 years in order to raise money for the orphanage he directed. Rev. Sergio Gutiérrez Benítez is transformed into a friar-cook at a Mexican orphanage, Ignacio 'Nacho Libre' (Jack Black). The Hollywood requirement to have a romantic interest attached leads to the rather unconvincing suggestion of a possible romance between Nacho and the strikingly beautiful Sister Encarnación (Ana de la Reguera). In line with many other films within the sports film genre, Nacho unsurprisingly wins the climatic bout that provides the film's climax thereby earning the money necessary to buy a bus and improve the facilities for the orphans.

With the exception of films such as *The Leather Saint* and *Nacho Libre*, it is rare that we find such Christian figures in sporting roles in film. Indeed, the choice of director Jared Hess to take a comedic approach to such a possibility in *Nacho Libre* reflects the presumed absurdity of such an occurrence (certainly from the perspective of expected audiences), and this absurdity is emphasized within the film itself. More typical is the incorporation of religious tropes into athletes or the creation of parallels between the lives of athletes and those of figures associated with Christianity. A relevant early example is *The Babe Ruth Story* (1948), a biopic of the legendary baseball player.

As several commentators have noted, the depiction of Babe Ruth in this much criticised film owes much to Christian exemplars. For Gerald Mote (quoted in Ardolino, 2003: 112), 'the movie is played as though ... Babe Ruth were Moses ... as gospel'. For Frank Ardolino (2003: 116), the film presents Ruth as 'the sacred bambino, born to save baseball and to heal children with the miraculous power of his home run', while Deborah Tudor (1997: 56)

contends that the film ‘creates a legendary hero akin to Christ in the sense that Ruth becomes a sacrificed (sports) god, whose exploits brought only good to the world’. Indeed, a Christian figure – Brother Matthias (Charles Bickford) at St. Mary’s Industrial School for Boys – introduces baseball to Ruth and encourages his developing talent, and baseball is itself associated with religion within the film. When a younger player encourages Babe to sue baseball after he is fired (unfairly the film suggests) by the Boston Braves, Babe responds ‘sue baseball? That would be like suing the church’.

Ruth, as depicted in *The Babe Ruth Story*, is transformed into an almost Christ-like figure, surrounding himself with children and capable, it would appear, of inspiring those children when necessary to recover from paralysis or life-threatening illnesses. In one incident while visiting Chicago for a World Series game between the Chicago Cubs and Ruth’s New York Yankees, he visits a dying boy named Johnny (Gregory Marshall) and promises to hit him a home run. As we watch Johnny listening to the game over the radio, Babe calls his shot, hits the home run, and the boy would appear to recover from his illness.

Babe eventually succumbs to a serious unnamed illness himself, but even here while dying in a hospital bed the film suggests he was willing to risk his own life – in a further Christ-like gesture – to save others by testing an experimental serum for his illness. In these later scenes, Babe also receives a Miraculous Medal from a young boy concerned about his illness and he proceeds to pin the medal to his shirt; we are then given a close up shot of the medal to affirm again Babe’s saintliness. If we were still in any doubt, the narrator reminds us over the final moments of the film, that to all the many fans who followed Babe during his life, Babe ended up ‘offering his life to help them and theirs.’

The Babe Ruth Story is not unique in its approach to its subject as sport films have often provided mythologised depictions of the athletes represented, frequently drawing on Christian exemplars to do so. One of the most successful sport film franchises, *Rocky*, is a significant example in this respect. Indeed, the first Oscar winning film of the series, *Rocky* (1976) opens (after the screen filling letters of Rocky) not with a shot of the fighter but of Jesus Christ, holding the Eucharist. The camera eventually zooms out from a shot of Christ's face to reveal it as part of a mural on the wall of a gym—appropriately called the 'Resurrection A.C.'—where Rocky is fighting. The tilting of the camera down from Jesus to Rocky makes a clear, and perhaps overly obvious, connection between the two figures. *Rocky's* director John G. Avildsen (2005) has acknowledged that he wanted to make this connection noting that 'I'll go from him to Rocky and I've already got a lot of the people on my side'. In this admission, Avildsen not only reveals his motivation but also his expectation of audience recognition and sympathy with the image of Jesus Christ, affirming the dominant Christian values of the film as a whole as well as the audience he was hoping to attract to watch it. The Christianity of *Rocky's* eponymous central protagonist, Rocky Balboa (played by the film's writer Sylvester Stallone), is also affirmed at several points in the film, particularly in moments in which we see him praying before big fights. As with *The Babe Ruth Story*, Rocky too is depicted as a saviour and as the film progresses and his identity is revealed, it becomes apparent that what he is redeeming is marginalized and underprivileged white working-class masculinity (Crosson, 2013).

It is clear from the opening of the film, including through the depiction of his apartment and the area in which he lives, that Rocky comes from an underprivileged working-class Italian-American background and the challenging circumstances he faces economically as well as physically are apparent. Despite his humble beginnings, and limited boxing ability, Rocky

nonetheless succeeds in getting a fight with the African American world heavyweight champion, Apollo Creed (Carl Weathers). Even though he is written off in advance as having no chance, Rocky succeeds in taking the champion to 15 rounds in a closely fought contest. In the film's emotionally charged and uplifting ending, we witness a battered but still standing Rocky call for his partner Adrian (Talia Shire) while the crowd chant his name; he has had his opportunity, gone the distance and in the process redeemed White working-class masculinity.

What *Rocky* successfully charts – and arguably is the most influential example of – is what I have called the ‘American Dream trajectory’ (Crosson, 2013). A crucial role of sport (and the sports film) has been its engagement with, and often affirmation of, this central ideology in American life, the American Dream of opportunity, upward social mobility and material success so central to that society. This ideology continues to be a powerful force, an ideology repeatedly affirmed by leading figures in American society, including in two major addresses in 2011, by President Barack Obama.⁶ The persistence of this ‘meritocracy myth’ (McNamee and Miller, 2009), in the face of all the evidence that points to its fallacy, owes much to two of the most influential cultural forces in American life, sport and film. Individually, both have contributed greatly to the affirmation of this ideology, a fact underscored when we encounter them together within film.

Sport provides one of the most popular and influential cultural practices for the affirmation and potential achievement of the American dream. As noted by Howard Nixon (1984: 25), ‘Sport is an appropriate vehicle for testing the ideology of the American Dream because the legitimizing beliefs of the sports institution mirror basic tenets of the American Dream’.

⁶ The first speech, ‘The Country We Believe In’ was delivered on April 13 2011 to The George Washington University, Washington, D.C. while the second was given in an address in Dublin during an official visit to Ireland on May 23, 2011.

These beliefs were summarised by Harry Edwards in his influential study *The Sociology of Sport* (1973). Though first published in 1973, the study still remains relevant to the depiction of sport – and religion – within the American sports film. Through a survey of references to sport in American magazines, newspapers and a major athletic journal, Edwards identified a ‘dominant American Sports creed’. Similar to those beliefs that underscore the American Dream, Edwards saw this creed as encompassing a series of beliefs concerned with affirming the advantages and benefits of participating in organised sports. Edwards summarised this creed under seven headings, incorporating 12 principal statements, which reflected the ideological goals of sport, including centrally ‘Religiosity’ and ‘expressions relating sports achievement to traditional American Christianity’ (1973: 69). As we have already considered, this concern has been a recurring feature of the sports film from its emergence in the United States in the early twentieth century (Crosson, 2013).

Much as with sport in the earlier part of the twentieth century, the American Dream trajectory has equally benefited from the imprimatur of religious association. This trajectory has been one of the most popular and commercially successful of the past forty years and is a recurring feature of the American sports film genre, often allied with and supported by references to Christianity. A relevant recent example from the early 21st century is the Walt Disney Pictures baseball themed production *The Rookie* (2002). *The Rookie* makes explicit a feature evident across baseball themed films as a whole (including such seminal films as *The Natural* (1984) and *Field of Dreams* (1989)): the indebtedness to Christianity for the authority of baseball in American life.⁷ *The Rookie* begins with a narrator describing the origins of the town of Big Lake, Texas, connecting this origin myth of a man who believed oil existed in the barren location of the town, with religion (through the two nuns that supported him

⁷ For further on this see Erickson (2001: 40-58).

financially and the priest whose advice also appears to have helped him realize his dream), the playing of baseball, and legendary figures in the game:

when the nuns told their parish priest about the man's dream and their investment in it, now, he counseled them to try and get their money back. Sheepishly, they admitted that it was too late, that the money was already spent. Well, the priest, he sighed, shook his head, and offered just one small bit of advice – bless the site with rose petals, and invoke the help of Saint Rita, patron saint of impossible dreams. And while the workers waited for the oil that would eventually come, they played baseball. Played baseball so well that some were able to give up the dirt and the despair and went on to play major-league ball in the glory days of Ruth and Gehrig.

This sequence also begins suggestively with a crane shot that provides a God-like and mythologizing perspective on the man stamping the ground beneath his feet in a barren and windswept landscape. With the discovery of oil, following the blessing with rose petals and the apparent intercession of Saint Rita, oil workers arrive to the area that would become Big Lake, and baseball (which we witness workers play) provides, the narrator tells us, a further avenue for success for townspeople. As a worker strikes the ball into the air, the narrator continues that Saint Rita 'decided to bless our little town just one more time', and the ball appears to land in the near-present, caught by a young boy (who is revealed to be the film's main protagonist, baseball player Jimmy Morris) in Groton, Connecticut.

The repeated reference to saint Rita (evident later in Morris' good luck charm, a St. Rita prayer medal) reflects the recurring presence of religion in the film, also apparent in the moments of prayer of the high school baseball team (which Morris coaches) before each

game. Furthermore, the opening crane-shot is repeated towards the end of the film, when Morris (Dennis Quaid) enters a Major League baseball stadium for the first time as a player, despite being 35 years old. On entering the gates of Rangers Ballpark in Arlington, Texas, a similar crane shot accentuates the stadium's size and impressiveness, looking down on Morris again (as with Big Lake's founder in the opening shot of the film) from a God-like perspective and emphasizing the church-like architecture of the stadium. In each of these moments, baseball and the dreams associated with it are given the significant imprimatur of religious association, a central tenet of both the dominant American Sports creed and the mainstream sports film (Crosson, 2013).⁸

Conclusion

Much as it has done in American society as a whole, Christianity and Christian figures have provided an important imprimatur for the depiction of sport in American film. While mainstream films may acknowledge the more decadent aspects of sport, Christianity is frequently employed to counterbalance such elements and ultimately suggest the importance of sport in American life. The recurring presence of Christian figures, particularly priests, in the American sport film has facilitated the acceptance and popularisation of sport – including formerly banned sports such as boxing – via its depiction in film. Filmmakers have also looked for inspiration to Christian figures and motifs in their sympathetic rendering of athletes. A fundamental and recurring concern in many of these depictions is the affirmation of a central ideology in American life, the American Dream. Sport, with the support and imprimatur of Christianity, has functioned throughout the twentieth century as one of the

⁸ For a discussion of a further relevant film – *The Blind Side* (2009) – with respect to sport, Christianity and the American Dream, see Crosson (2013: 78-85).

most popular cultural vehicles for the apparent affirmation of the American Dream trajectory, a trajectory repeatedly employed within Hollywood cinema.

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