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A Philosophical Examination of Pauline Thought on Sporting Activities (Recreation), Spirituality and Well-Being in Letters to Timothy

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ABSTRACT

Sporting activities have immense benefits for the well-being of humans. In the canon of Christian scriptures, there is a seeming silence on the matters relating to recreation, spirituality and well-being. Indeed, there has not been tangible evidence of the essentiality of sporting activities to the full development of the human body. In Paul's letter to Timothy, there is an identification of the significance of recreation and its links to spirituality and well-being. The import and implications of this have not been appropriately critiqued in recent scholarly discussions. As such, this paper examines, from a philosophical perspective, Pauline thoughts on recreation, spirituality and well-being in the context of Letters to Timothy. The methodological tools that the paper engaged are purely analytical and historical-critical. Attempts were made to deploy the historical-critical tools in examining the portion of Pauline letters to Timothy within its historical and sociological context. The imports of Pauline's statement in the text was rigorously critiqued using analytical tools. This paper hopes to establish that when the Christian scriptures are directly silent on matters involving recreational and sporting activities, the need for humanity to engage in them for more remarkable physical improvement is encouraged within the context of the scriptures. In the end, the paper attempted to identify boundaries and parameters for Christian involvement in sports and the extent to which these can go to promote core Christian virtues and values.

Keywords: *philosophical, recreation, spirituality, Timothy, wellbeing*

INTRODUCTION

Sports are prominent aspects of cultures around the world and relevant to human life. Hence, sporting activities are discussed in public space as much as other matters like governance, ethics, sexuality, etc. In many ways, sports are a microcosm of life.¹ Although sports have captured the minds and ears of people across the globe, they have seemingly evaded the attention of theologians and philosophers.² It was somewhat hard to find a scholar who had thought deeply and critically about sports from a distinctly Christian perspective before this time and era. This situation is surprising considering that several sports began and developed historically in overtly religious settings. Recently, however, there has been a budding field of scholarship on the nexus between religion and sports. Christian theologians and philosophers are writing on the interaction between sports and Christianity. This conference serves as a veritable example in this regard.

To put the focus of this paper in proper perspective, sports or sporting activities may be viewed in two ideological ways: some people view sports as a mere form of exercise and game, while others worship and view sports as a sort of religion and even nearly as a god.³ The first perspective minimizes sports to a childlike activity, suitable for passing the time but largely insignificant for the weighty matters of life. The second, however, conceptualizes and deifies sports and sporting activities as a form of expressing religious devotion and offering sacrifices of money and time on the altar of winning.⁴ From the lens of the scriptures, sport is viewed as more than a game and less than a god.⁵ In the New Testa-

¹ J. Treat, Sports in Biblical Narrative, in Global Perspectives on Sport and Christianity (eds) Afe Adogame et al., Routledge: Abingdon, 2018. 29

² J. Treat, Sports in Biblical Narrative, 29

³ J. Treat, Sports in Biblical Narrative, 29

⁴ J. Treat, Sports in Biblical Narrative, 29-30.

⁵ J. Treat, Sports in Biblical Narrative, 29

ment, there are various sports metaphors used to explain the virtues of Christian disciples (see Galatians 5:7; Philippians 3:14; 1 Timothy 6:12a and 2 Timothy 4:7); Apostle Paul mainly employed these metaphors. Every indication showed that Paul appreciated the significance of sports activities, especially in well-being. The various Pauline texts cited above also revealed that the Apostle recognized the value of sports and its connectivity to spirituality and well-being. However, extant research on sports and Christianity has not given enough attention to Pauline's thoughts on sports, spirituality, and well-being. This paper sets to fill in this gap.

SPORTS AND CHRISTIANITY: LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the past twenty years, there has been a consistent academic trajectory exploring the relationship and interactions between sport and religion. It has been established that theologians and philosophers of religion have been slow to recognize the cultural significance of modern sports.⁶ However, there has been a shift in this perspective. In fact, in recent times, there has been the birth of research centers, academic journals and church-based sport-faith initiatives, the contributors to recent monographs and anthologies that analyze the various aspects of the relationship between Christianity and sports. Historians and anthropologists have mapped a relationship between religion and sports that spans approximately 3000 years. Most recent scholarly works have examined the dialectical relation between sports and Christianity. Several historical works identified the links between sacredness and sports, including when ritual-cultic ball games were played as a form of appeasement to the gods of fertility, and the athletic spectacles of ancient Greece and the Olympic games held in honour of mythological deities. Other such historical works documented the gladiatorial contests of Rome, the festivals and folk-games of the Middle Ages, the general Puritan suspicion and prohibitions against sports, and lastly, the Victorian ideology, which had significantly shaped the character of modern sports.⁷

Some scholarly works explored how sports have interacted with other world religions. The fruit of these researches has provided valuable comparative insights for scholars interested in examining the nexus between Christianity and sports. The searchlight of research has also beamed on the relationship between sports and Christianity, especially in historical, theological and sociological research on gender, embodiment and identity.⁸ The significance of studying the relationship between sports and religions has been underscored in this regard. Rebecca Alpert aptly indicates that adding religion to the conversation underscores the importance of sports as one of the most popular and significant dimensions of human experience in the twenty-first century. Her recent book is illuminating not simply because it explores the complex relationship between religion and sports, providing some definitional clarity, but more importantly because it provides a useful pedagogical twist to the field, 'taking case studies based on actual events to test ... theoretical knowledge in real-life situations.'⁹ Alpert remarks, 'examining actual cases will connect classroom learning to real life, develop new perspectives on religion and sports, and provide a chance to respond to the challenges and conflicts in this arena'.¹⁰

In his discussion on the relationship between sports and religion, Michael Novak states that 'sports are religious in the sense that they are organized institutions, disciplines, and liturgies;¹¹ and also, in the sense that they teach religious qualities of heart and soul. In particular, they recreate symbols of cosmic struggle, in which human survival and moral courage are not assured'. Whatever sports are today, 'they are not mere games, diversions, pastimes,'¹² instead, cultural activities provide axiological meaning for contemporary American communities (in our context). In his article, *Sports in the Biblical narrative*, Jeremy Treat aptly remarks how sports that currently capture the public imagination across the globe have primarily evaded the attention of Christian theologians.¹³ There seem to be two polar responses: some dismiss sports as mere games, while others worship sports as nearly a god. Treat argues that when viewed through the lens of Scripture, sports are more than a game, and less than a god.

6 N. J. Watson, and A. Parker, Sports and Christianity: Mapping the Field, in N. J. Watson and A. Parker. (eds.) Sports and Christianity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives (foreword by Michael Novak), London: Routledge (2013): 9-88.

7 H. McLeod, Sport and Religion in England, c.1790-1914, in N.J. Watson and A. Parker (eds.), Sports and Christianity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives, London: Routledge, 2012.; A. Koch, The Christian View of Sport: Its Foundations in the Holy Scriptures and the Church Father's Writings, in K. Lixey, K., C. Hübenal, D. Mieth, and N. Müller (eds.) , Sport and Christianity: A Sign of the Times in the Light of Faith Washington, DC, USA: Catholic University of America Press, 2012; 89-112. (Also available online: <http://www.conspiration.de/koch/english/menschenbild-e.html>; R. Brasch, How did Sports Begin? New York: David McKay Co., Inc. 1970.

8 Benn, Dagkas and Jawad, Embodied Faith: Islam, Religious Freedom and Educational Practices in Physical Education. Sport, Education and Society, 16, 1: 17-34; 2011; Benn, Pfister and Jawad, Muslim Women and Sport, London: Routledge, 2010.

9 R. Alpert, A Case Study Textbook on Religion and Sport. West Sussex, UK: Columbia University Press, 2015. 4

10 R. Alpert, A Case Study Textbook on Religion and Sport, 4.

11 Michael Novak, "The Natural Religion" In Shirl Hoffman (ed.), Sport and Religion (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1992), 36

12 Michael Novak, "The Natural Religion", 36

13 J. Treat, Sports in Biblical Narrative, 30.

Addressing non-Western perspectives on sports and Christianity. David Chidester explores the enduring relationship between football and Christianity and indigenous religious traditions in South Africa. Introduced by the British military in the nineteenth century, football was adopted by African Christian converts at mission schools and churches, becoming a part of African Christian life like literacy, wage labour and European clothing. As football became the most popular African sport during the twentieth century, it was attended by indigenous rituals of strengthening and healing, drawing upon an African traditional religious heritage.¹⁴ During the World Cup in 2010, three religions were on display – Christianity, African Traditional Religion, and the religion of football. By analyzing the Christian prayers, the ancestral rituals, and the contests over ownership of sacred symbols, such as the vuvuzela, in the religion of football in South Africa, the chapter identifies three important features of World Christianity – mediations with indigeneity, negotiations with local sovereignty and transactions with a global economy.¹⁵ From the extant literature, it can be seen that there has been a robust scholarly reflection on how the sports-Christianity relationship has developed over time, and also how it is variously played out by different individuals and groups in different geographical and cultural contexts. Besides, we can see that there have been insightful comments on how faith might be used as a means to negotiate and challenge the values and practices of modern-day sport, thereby creating more equitable and inclusive sporting experiences for those concerned. In the context of this paper, the thrust here is to emphasize the value and worth of recreation towards well-being and human development.

SPORTING ACTIVITIES IN THE BIBLE

Leisure, the arts, sports and rest are listed in several places in the Bible. In the Old Testament, leisure is first spotted in 'ideal' form in the Garden of Eden. Before the fall, Adam and Eve were free from the compulsive forces of work to have a faith-based relationship with God. The Sabbath is the idea that people have freedom from work (Exodus 20:8-11).¹⁶ Music and dance or the arts are listed in Psalm 150:4. Celebration of the holy days (or holidays) is a form of leisure. Connally said he believes it was the precursor to camping. According to him, 'During the feast of the tabernacles, Jews thought about the Exodus. They erected tents and got away from the hubbub of everyday life to think how good God had been to them in the past.' Hospitality or leisure as a social recreation is found in the Old Testament. In the Songs of Solomon, sex is mentioned as a leisure activity. Sports figures mainly in Scripture as a metaphor for Christian discipleship in the New Testament. For example, 1 Corinthians 9:24-25 says *'Do you not know that all the runners run in a race, but only one gets the prize? Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we get a crown that will last forever.'*¹⁷

The fact that the New Testament writers used the imagery of sport so frequently is significant. Further examples are Romans 9:16; 1 Corinthians 9:26; Galatians 2:2; 5:7; Philippians 2:16; and Hebrews 12:1-2, 12-14. Many New Testament references to 'fighting' and receiving a 'crown' may also envisage the sporting arena. The point here is that since these verses refer exclusively to the best of spiritual endeavour, the writers must have approved these aspects of the sport. The apostles were not only fully conversant with the world of sport but expected their readers to be also! A final significant statement is that believers' bodies are the 'temple of the Holy Spirit. If this is so, we should be wise and responsible stewards of them (1 Corinthians 3:16).

AN EXAMINATION OF PAULINE THOUGHTS ON SPORTING ACTIVITIES (RECREATION), SPIRITUALITY AND WELL-BEING IN LETTERS TO TIMOTHY

Among the New Testament writers, the Apostle Paul led the use of a wide variety of sports metaphors to explain the virtues of Christian disciples. In the following texts, Galatians 5:7; Philippians 3:14; 1 Timothy 6:12a; and 2 Timothy 4:7, the apostle described Christian commitment to Christ, using various sports images. The combined images of running a race, boxing, and training for an athletic contest (1 Corinthians 9:24-27).¹⁸

However, the most well-known passage cited about any specific encouragement towards sporting activities, recreation, and well-being in Pauline letters is 1 Timothy 4:8. *'For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.'* When we read this text, the question that comes to mind is that what does Paul mean by "Physical training is

14 A. Adogame et.al., "Introduction" in Global Perspectives on Sport and Christianity (eds) Afe Adogame et al., Routledge: Abingdon, 2018. 4-5

15 A. Adogame et.al., "Introduction" 5.

16 <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/leisure-recreation-sports-evidenced-in-bible-he-says/> accessed on 28/1/2022

17 <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/leisure-recreation-sports-evidenced-in-bible-he-says/> accessed on 28/1/2022

18 <https://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/75240.pdf> accessed on 28/1/2022.

of some value"? Is he using "some" to signify "little" to point out that physical training does not matter much at all and should not be considered in the grand scheme of things?¹⁹ Or is he using physical training as a comparative tool to emphasize the great importance of spiritual training? Can we say he is speaking against the opinion and practice that excessive fasting and beating of one's body draw one closer to God by those actions themselves? It may even be that Paul means all of the above speculations.

For instance, *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* suggests the possibility that Paul is speaking against the belief that asceticism brings one closer to God. It was noted there that "the antithetical allows the linguistically most obvious rendering 'physical exercise.' The context, however, makes it clear that there is no attack on Hellenic development of the body, as lexical association might seem to demand (cf. v. 7), but rather a rejection of narrow encratic strivings."²⁰ The worth and value of physical exercise and recreation do not match that of spiritual training. So, the issue of comparison does not arise here. The point here is that Paul the Apostle recognizes the value and worth of sporting activities and points to the fact that it is profitable and beneficial in some regard. However, spiritual training is beneficial on a much grander scale because its reward is eternal, not temporal. William Hendriksen, a New Testament scholar of the 1950s, puts it this way.

It is not surprising that the Apostle now compares the value of physical training and training for godly living. He states that the former is of some benefit. It is helpful for something. The latter, however, is of benefit in every way. It is helpful for all things. He is by no means belittling the value of physical exercise. He says two things: (a) that the boon which bodily training bestows, however great it may be, is inferior to the reward that the divine life promises. At best, the former best bestows health, vigour, the beauty of physical form. These things are lovely and to be appreciated. But the latter bestows life everlasting! (b) That the sphere in which bodily training is of benefit is far more restricted than that in which godly living confers its reward. The former concerns the here and now. The latter concerns the here and now but also reaches far beyond it.²¹

Philip H. Towner, Dean of the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship of the American Bible Society, also illustrates this lesser-to-greater comparison of physical and spiritual training. "Paul admits that such exercise has 'some value,' but the purpose of saying this is mainly to limit its relevance within this discussion and shine the brighter light on exercise in godliness."²²

In the text context, there is every indication that Timothy would have been very familiar with the physical training about which Paul was speaking. The Greek world placed a high emphasis on training for games, putting one's body to the test, and being disciplined in the pursuit of bodily fitness. Paul used the well-known physical fitness practice to throw light onto the much more important pursuit of godly, spiritual fitness. While physical training is essential, one ought to consider a note of warning: everything in moderation.²³ Physicality has always had the potential to become an idol to Christians pursuing physical health and well-being. The devil tries to wedge into a Christian's mind the idea that physical health and good looks are most important in life. Placing physical fitness higher up on the totem pole than spiritual life is all too easy a trap to fall into.²⁴

It is known that an effort to exercise can be good and profitable to the body, but sometimes too much of a good thing can eventually turn into a bad thing. Martin Luther notes on this that: 'Fasting and the like – this bodily training leads to the breaking and controlling of the body. This is good, but two points of moderation are involved: first, that there be no hostility here; and second, that one place no trust in this kind of life.'²⁵ First of all, Luther warns that one should not harm his body by physical training, and in his time, he would have meant asceticism and fasting gone too far. And secondly, Luther stresses there is no eternal reward in simply physical training.²⁶ There is no higher place in Heaven for those with a lower body fat percentage. There is no mansion prepared, especially for those whose faces have graced the cover of a magazine. Physical training has some value, but not when compared to

19 Nathan F. Loersch, "The Impact of Regular Physical Exercise on The Pastor and His Ministry" A Thesis Submitted in Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary March 2015. 14

20 G. Kittel, G. W. Bromiley & G. Friedrich, Ed., Vol. 1: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1964), 775-776.

21 William Hendriksen, *Exposition of The Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1957), 151

22 William Hendriksen, *Exposition of The Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1957), 151

23 Nathan F. Loersch, "The Impact of Regular Physical Exercise on the Pastor and His Ministry" 14-19.

24 Hilton C. Oswald, Ed. *Luther's Works*, Vol. 28, *Lectures on 1 Timothy* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1973), 321-322.

25 Hilton C. Oswald, Ed. *Luther's Works*, Vol. 28, *Lectures on 1 Timothy* 321-322.

26 Hilton C. Oswald, Ed. *Luther's Works*, Vol. 28, *Lectures on 1 Timothy* 321-322.

spiritual training. Luther spoke about how he perceived the value of physical training: 'Of course, the other exercise is worth something too, but it profits only you. There is some fruit, but it is little in comparison with this. If a person reads or preaches, he accomplishes more than just to fast. If there is some fruit, it belongs to me because I am chastising my own body and profit no one else.'²⁷

However, consider this possible wrinkle: could a Christian's physical training be of spiritual benefit to others due to the possibility that a Christian's physical training enables him to serve others better in some way? Luther was probably not thinking along those lines when he spoke about physical training benefitting only the person doing the exercising. Regarding the benefit of exercise in pastoral ministry, Armin Schuetze speaks to a possible spiritual benefit as a result of a pastor's physical training. 'The pastor who does not take care of his body may cut short his time of service through such neglect. Yet the value of physical exercise and training is limited.'²⁸ Suppose a pastor neglects his physical health to the point that he can no longer carry out his pastoral duties simply because of his poor physical condition. Then he has done the spiritual health of people a great disservice because spiritually enriching people is the top priority of a pastor's work. The same argument goes for a believer who neglects his physical body. In the long run, the benefit of recreation and sporting activities is immense in generating the necessary well-being that individuals need to perform their duties on the earth. Indeed, one may argue that recreation and sporting activities are crucial for proper spirituality in the context of any believer or Christian.

PHILOSOPHICAL CRITIQUE

Pauline ideology clearly shows that sporting activities and recreation have actual worth and value. Paul seemingly placed godliness (another word for spirituality) to have eternal value. However, sporting activities and recreation, which are all grouped under physical exercise in this text, have temporal value. As noted by Treat, 'sports are a part of God's intended design for His created order.'²⁹ Treat notably argued further that 'God's image-bearers are called to develop God's creation for the good of others and to delight in God's creation because of its intrinsic good. Within this context of playfully developing and delighting in God's creation, we can say that *sports are part of God's intention and design for creation*.'³⁰ It can be philosophically propounded that sports are intrinsically good for humanity.

Treat argued that two standard views oppose the goodness of sports in God's design for creation, and these views are based on dualistic thinking. One is an ascetic body/soul dualism that portrays sport as bad. Two, a sacred/ secular dualism that viewed sport as neutral is neither good nor bad.³¹ The first view is based on a body/soul dualism that presents anything spiritual as good and anything physical as bad. This sort of view, according to Treats, rightfully emphasizes the call of Jesus as one of self-denial but often wrongly confuses the denial of the sinful nature with the denial of God's good creational gifts. However, such a view in the larger context of scriptures is a fallacy. It is clear that God made the world good and is to be received for the enjoyment of His people (see Titus 1:15; Col. 2:20-23). The matter of denying the "flesh" (σάρξ) is not a denial of our physicality, but a denial of our sinful nature. Historically, this dualism, rooted in Greek thought and inherited in part by the monastic movement of the early church, has endured into evangelicalism and often been the foundation for a view of sports as "worldly" or a distraction from religion.

The second view stems from dividing God's creation into two categories: sacred and secular. God cares about prayer, Bible studies, and church according to this view. Still, work, sports, and art activities are neutral and only matter to God if they are used for higher spiritual purposes such as evangelism. In contrast, common in Christian thought today, this way of thinking resembles an otherworldly Greek dualism more than God's will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.³² However, there is a holistic outlook on the world in the scriptures. God intends that everything should be wholesome. Our life should be one and whole: sacred. That is, even sports is expected to have sacred value. In this regard, scholars such as Treats argued that God cares about baptism *and* business, redemption *and* romance, Sabbath *and* sport. Playing sports was not meant to be a neutral activity but was designed as a good part of the broader vision of humanity cultivating and cherishing God's creation. Despite the claim that sports from a Christian perspective may have instrumental value, such as being used for mission and

27 Nathan F. Loersch, "The Impact of Regular Physical Exercise on the Pastor and His Ministry" 14-19.

28 Armin W. Schuetze, 1 Timothy; 2 Timothy; Titus (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1991), 67.

29 J. Treat, Sports in Biblical Narrative, 35.

30 J. Treat, Sports in Biblical Narrative, 36.

31 J. Treat, Sports in Biblical Narrative, 36.

32 J. Treat, Sports in Biblical Narrative, 36.

evangelism, this paper perfectly agrees with Treats' view that sports can be a platform for evangelism or a classroom for morality. Still, they are, first and foremost, a playground for receiving and enjoying the goodness of the Creator. Therefore, the ideological deduced here is that sports are intrinsically good and engaging in them is basking in Creator for the benefit of the body given to humans by the Creator.³³

CLOSING REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATION

There is a robust understanding of biblical and spiritual perspectives towards sports. In value, Paul claimed that sporting activities have their temporal and earthly value. Within the creation narratives, as argued by Treats and subscribed to by me, sports are intrinsically good and means of enjoying the goodness of God who has given us the body to live on earth. Therefore, the philosophical outlook of sport within the ambit of scriptures is that it is a gift to be enjoyed, and as treats, as put it, it is more than a game and less than a god. That is, it is neither a neutral nor a bad thing. Instead, it is suitable for the human body. It effectively puts us in a position to exercise our spirituality, and through sporting activities, we have come even to understand the benefit of spirituality. Therefore, it is suggested that Christian athletes [and fans] should be role models of sportsmanship, fair play, discipline, and integrity. They should be able to stand up to pressures to "win at all costs" and to commercialize sports in ways that reduce athletes and fans to commodities. Christians should also engage in sporting activities for the goodness thereof and the benefits they generate for developing the body and propagation of spiritual values around the globe.

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33 J. Treat, Sports in Biblical Narrative, 35.