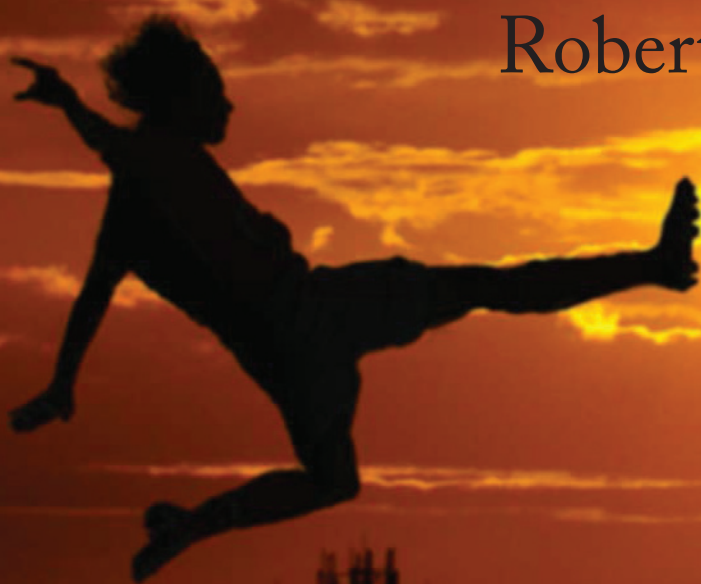


THE GAMES PEOPLE PLAY

Theology, Religion, and Sport

Robert Ellis



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The Games People Play
Theology, Religion, and Sport

Robert Ellis



The Lutterworth Press

*In grateful memory of Mum, who took me to my
first rugby match, with thanks to Dad, who made and
held me on the box upon which I stood at my first
big football match, and with loving admiration for Sue,
who has learned to like sport in loving me*

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Introduction

A Grandstand View at the Cotswold Olimpicks

On an unusually warm Friday evening in early June, my wife and I took our places on a grassy bank in the Gloucestershire countryside. Before us was a wonderful panorama of the Vale of Evesham and in the foreground a fenced-off area surrounded by half a dozen security guards. Seated in this natural amphitheater we were among several thousand spectators gathered for sporting entertainment. Behind us on the plateau of Dover's Hill we had just bought our supper from one of the food stalls, and there were to be displays of performing pipers, dancers, martial artists, dogs with their handlers, and single-stick fighters (not all at the same time, you understand).

To the casual onlooker what we were about to witness—including team obstacle races, a five-mile run, hammer-throwing and shot-putting, and, most remarkably of all, shin-kicking—seemed part village fair, part school sports, and part *It's a Knock Out*.¹ But Robert Dover's games have a fine pedigree, going back four hundred years to 1612. Dover, a local Catholic gentleman, appears to have had some kind of royal blessing on his attempt to preserve and foster the traditional English games which were under threat from Puritan sensibilities in many areas of England. James I sent Dover a suit of clothes as a mark of this blessing, and Dover wore this suit (or so we believe) complete with feathered cap to open the

1. Those too young to recall the whacky BBC TV game show which ran from the mid-1960s could consult the website dedicated to it: <http://www.its-a-knockout.TV/>.

games year by year—for they were an annual event. In the 1630s many of the great poets of the day celebrated his munificence by contributing to a volume of poetry in which these Cotswold Games were associated with the ancient Olympiad, and they became known as the “Cotswold Olimpicks.”

The annual celebrations came to end when James I’s successor Charles I was deposed and the Commonwealth established. The Puritan parliament suppressed the games, but Charles II then reinstituted them in or shortly after 1660 following the Restoration. In the 2010 games which we witnessed the local Catholic priest played the part of Robert Dover in the opening ceremony—though, somewhat ironically, a team from the local Baptist church won the team competition of the evening. What would their Puritan forbears have made of that?

Dover’s games continued until the nineteenth century when they became more chaotic and finally fell victim to opposition from landowners wanting to enclose Dover’s Hill as pasture, and from clergy who became censorious about what they saw as rowdy behavior. In the twentieth century the games were revived once more and are now an annual event again. The British bid to host the Olympic Games in 2012 included a reference to Dover’s Games. The London Olympic Committee wrote that “An Olympic Games held in London in 2012 will mark a unique anniversary—it will be exactly 400 years from the moment that the first stirrings of Britain’s Olympic beginnings can be identified.”²

Why might any of this be interesting to those not within easy reach of Chipping Campden, or to those without curiosity concerning Olympic trivia? This book will seek to explore the relationship between Christianity and the all-pervasive cultural phenomenon of modern sport. In so doing we will be examining theories which suggest, among other things, that sport has become a kind of surrogate religion in the twenty-first century. We will also be attempting to outline a theology of sport—that is, suggesting how sport might fit into our understanding of God’s way with the world and our attempt to live godly lives in the world.

The Cotswold Olimpicks clearly have interest to sports historians (and there are many of them). But they seem also to have particular significance for those concerned with theology, religion, and sport. The games began as a theological and political gesture; James I supported them because he believed they presented opportunities for conversion

2. Robert Dover’s *Cotswold Olimpicks*, “About the Games.”

(of Catholics!); they were suppressed on ostensibly theological grounds by Puritans, showing attitudes which have proved pervasively influential down to the present day; in the nineteenth-century, crowd trouble was one of the factors in their discontinuance. Robert Dover's Games, we shall see, present many of the issues about theology, religion, and sport in a kind of microcosm.

The first three chapters in this book are each relatively self-contained, though the total argument requires readers to work through the whole. The history of sport, in particular in relation to Christianity, is traced in the first chapter—noting the major changes of mood and policy as the phenomenon which we know as modern sport develops over many centuries. The second chapter considers sport as a feature of contemporary society by exploring it in relation to a number of themes: business, the media, consumerism, gender, race, and politics. In chapter 3 the focus switches to a discussion of both contemporary religious belief and practice, and sporting experience, and examines the interrelation between these phenomena.

The chapters in the second half of the book, chapters 4 through 6, belong together and build in various ways on the discussions of the earlier chapters. In them we attempt to outline a theology of sport. In chapter 4 the main focus is on a biblical theology of play; in chapter 5 we consider what motivates us to be involved with sports and why winning might matter to us; we also ponder the distortions of sport which sometimes arise from a disordered desire to win. In chapter 6 the concept of transcendence is given a key role in this developing theology of sport, and questions of sin and salvation are considered. A conclusion answers one or two remaining questions while leaving others for another time. Throughout the whole we make use of the responses received in empirical research among sports players and supporters which ground the reflections in particular ways.

I owe thanks to many people for their help with this project. At Wipf & Stock, Robin Parry has been encouraging from the moment (to use an appropriate sporting metaphor) the idea was first pitched to him, and Christian Amondson and Matt Wimer have been patient supporters through the writing and editing phase. My copy-editor Trisha Dale has attempted to tame my text for publishing.

Colleagues and students at Regent's Park College, Oxford, have allowed me to present various parts of this work to them and offered

Introduction

helpful comments. The college's Oxford Centre for Christianity and Culture invited me to take part in a lecture series on Christianity and sport in early 2011 for which I am grateful, and the contributions of other participants in that series was a valuable spur to my own thinking. Justin Barrett (now of Fuller Theological Seminary) offered invaluable advice on the empirical work I undertook. Pamela-Sue Anderson offered advice and reading on the issues of gender as I began to explore them in the book, and Nick Wood has shared some of his own thinking on play and given some useful bibliographical suggestions. Parts of my manuscript have been read by Paul Fiddes and Anthony Clarke, and their suggestions have been incisive and helpful. None of these colleagues and friends can bear any responsibilities for the book's many shortcomings which are mine alone, but it is a better book for their wise counsel.

Readers will soon recognize the immense debt I owe to academic colleagues and others who have explored aspects of sport, or religion, or both, before me. Stuart Weir, of Verité Sport, has given particularly valuable assistance in initial orientation to the literature and in discussing various ideas and lines of argument. In the wider academic sphere I have been helped by countless colleagues, most of whom I do not know, and some of whose work I have drawn on significantly in my writing. Naming them all at this point would be lengthy and risk omissions, but my gratitude is real.

For the research I undertook with sports fans and players I would like to give special thanks to all those who responded, but perhaps also give a special word of thanks to the generous supporters of the following clubs who responded to my surveys en masse: London Irish, Cardiff Blues, and Bristol rugby union; St Helen's rugby league; Cardiff City, Reading, and Everton football. Also thanks to the players of: Gosford All Blacks Rugby Football Club, Kidlington Cricket Club, Ranelagh Harriers athletics club, and footballers from the Berks, Bucks & Oxon League. Finally, my thanks also go to all my American respondents who returned the American versions of the surveys, especially staff and students at Georgetown College, Kentucky. If only all our teams could prosper!

Reaching for the Heavens

A (Very) Brief History of Religion and Sport

TO THOSE WHOSE ASSOCIATION with sport is mainly a matter of the grandstand or the TV, or indeed the sports center or swimming pool, it may come as a surprise to discover that the study of sport has become a major growth area in universities across the Western world. The sports pages of our newspapers give ample evidence of an interest in the physiological and even psychological aspects of sports performance, but in the academy scholars have been gainfully and increasingly employed on tracing the history of sports, in studying sport as a social phenomenon, and also considering sport's relation to religion—a relationship which properly and inevitably presents itself for scrutiny in any serious study of sport. Historically, taking a rather grand view and simplifying somewhat, we can say that the relationship between religion and sport (specifically, between Christianity and sport) has been characterized by three kinds of attitude. These attitudes have tended to predominate (or are very well illustrated) in particular historical phases and it permits the narrative which follows to be arranged into three distinct parts.

In ancient times sport appears to have been seen as a vehicle for communion with the divine and for regulating humanity's relationship with God or the gods. In such a world, sport was a sacred practice that enabled humans to reach for the heavens, so to speak, and many historians argue that the roots of modern sport are to be found in religious

rituals of one sort or another. While few would seriously speak of religion and sport as being coterminous today, there are some contemporary attitudes to sport that might be seen as similar to aspects of these ancient characteristics.

By contrast, another response typical of some early Christian and post-Reformation attitudes has been to see sport as a dangerous diversion, a frivolous exercise, a distraction from the serious business of living. If not sinful in itself, then it is quite likely to lead its performers and spectators towards sin and needs to be treated with caution or even hostility. This attitude has often been manifested in official pronouncements from church authorities, though various pieces of evidence suggest that the situation “on the ground” has often been more hospitable. Those who opposed games and sport did so because, far from believing that it allowed people to reach through sport for the heavens, they feared that it might lead them instead to hell.

A third response, again evident in antiquity but also in Christian responses within the last two hundred years, has seen sport as a means of character-building and moral improvement, and as such a highly appropriate activity for Christian participation. According to a typical instance of such an attitude, sport may not have any intrinsic religious substance but it may be an instrument in developing godly habits or states of mind. Alongside approval for sports generally we frequently see its instrumental usefulness—for spiritual growth, as an attention-grabbing tool in evangelism or a wholesome pastime for the disadvantaged, or indeed for more commercial purposes: sport has been useful to all kinds of people, some of them Christian ideologues and practitioners. Sport might be the ladder upon which its players might climb to godliness.

As we consider the history of sport we will see these three broad types of response manifested chronologically. To some extent all three are still characteristic of our contemporaries’ more ambivalent responses to sport, and all three will offer fruitful themes for our later theological reflections.

In chapter 4 we will define sport more carefully, but a word about what is meant by “sport” will be useful for us as we begin—if only to show that in this sphere, as in so many others, complex human activity defies neat definition. We need to distinguish “sport” from both “play” and “games,” though the three terms may be said to nest inside one another. This will be significant when we consider the theology of sport,

because we will also need to consider play and games in that context. “Play” is generally thought to be an unstructured activity, entire to itself and for its own sake. Some scholars thus speak of play as “autotelic”¹—it has no end or purpose beyond itself. Play is throwing a Frisbee to a friend on the beach or trying to hit a can with pebbles, or it may be a child’s make-believe game. In sporting terms though, a “game” may also involve playing Frisbee on the beach but now there are makeshift rules, changing and possibly unequal teams, common agreement on what might constitute a score. But this remains very local. There may or may not be an agreed finish time, though it is quite likely that it will be set by external requirements (dinner) or just fizzle out as people leave. Frisbee becomes “sport” when the rules that govern the game are universalized and bureaucratized. They are fixed away from the location of the game, and they remain the same on repeated playing of the game. Soccer on the beach will have many of the universalized rules (goals, equal teams, fouls, and free kicks) but probably not all: touch lines, off sides, referees, standardized measured goals with posts, and so on. These types of activity perhaps cannot be entirely and definitively separated from one another, there will be transitional instances such as that soccer game on the beach, which show how they bleed into one another. Generally, full rules (and, we might say, “true sport”) are found on the playing field and the court. And we should also note that *wherever* and *whenever* this sport has manifested itself, other things have tended to be found too: in particular, commercial interests have never been far away. Someone will sell the spectators a drink, and there is a good chance that someone else will open a book to take bets. Those who lament the lost innocent days of sport are lamenting an illusion. In fact, even when sport was primarily a religious ritual it is likely that commercial considerations intruded.

The term “sport,” then, refers precisely to a relatively modern phenomenon. What we now mean by “sport” in our everyday conversation,

1. Johan Huizinga speaks of play as “pointless” and suggests that in its purest sense play serves no other purpose beyond itself. It shares this characteristic with religious ritual. See his *Homo Ludens*, 2, 19. Allen Guttman wants to argue that the suggestion that all ancient play is essentially cultic is a *denial* of its autotelic nature. See *From Ritual*, 19. We will consider in chapter 6 whether play, and indeed sport, should be considered necessarily autotelic. Guttman, incidentally, also helpfully proposes that sport needs to be distinguished from contests as well as play and games—thus helping us distinguish rugby from scrabble, for instance (*From Ritual*, 5–7). We return to this at the beginning of chapter 4 where I will propose that contest needs to be part of the definition of sport.

“modern sport” in its universalized and bureaucratized forms, may generally be said to be less than two hundred years old—though a case could be made in a few instances to go back further. However, as we shall see, the sport of the ancient Greeks has many features in common with “modern sports,” while many of the major public spectacles of the Romans perhaps had rather fewer such common features. By the Middle Ages, most of the activities that we might consider in a history of sport are not really sports at all in the sense in which I have defined them. I use the term “sport,”² then, with some elasticity in my historical narrative. The ancient proto-sports have some connection with our modern activities, but were also technically different in important ways. It would be tiresome to note this at each and every juncture but the reader ought to bear the differences in mind.

Sacred Sport?

Sport appears to have its ancient origins in religion and ritual. Nowhere is this more graphically evident than in an ancient and deadly Meso-American ball game that was very important for three thousand years until the invasion of the Conquistadors and had a number of permutations. It was played on a court rather than a field, and more than fifteen hundred of these courts have been discovered. Mayan records suggest a mythology relating to the sun and the moon played out in the ball game: the game is variously described now according to the narrator as a cross between football, lacrosse, basketball, and volleyball. It appears that any part of the body except the hands could be used to hit the ball, and in some variations what we might call rackets and bats were used. In some early versions it is likely that the ball had to be played with the hip. The goal was a ring only slightly larger than a basketball hoop, placed high on a wall at right angles to the center of the court. A five-foot-high wall in front of the main wall and under the hoop meant that a direct angle of approach was not possible—the ball had to be bounced off the wall into the goal. Each team had seven players.

Sometimes the game appears to have been played for entertainment alone, often on more or less improvised courts, but the ceremonial

2. From hereon I will generally drop the use of quotation marks when referring elastically to ancient practices which we may consider do not meet our modern definitions.

version of the game was a much more serious affair. It seems that the ball may have been a symbol for the sun and the court for the galaxy; or the game may have played out a grisly mythological tale relating to the founding of the world, and the transition from death to life. In any case, the game would end when the first goal was scored in the hoop twenty feet off the ground—though it was so difficult to score a goal that the game could last for days.³ There is some debate about what happened next. In one location on the smaller wall under the hoop are carvings of the “award ceremony.” Seven players of one team face seven players of the other team. In the center, underneath each goal, are the captains. One is holding the other’s severed head.⁴ It has usually been thought that the winning captain executed his losing counterpart at the end of the game, but more recently it has been suggested that the winner may have been given the special prize of an immediate trip to paradise. It was the former Liverpool Football Club manager, Bill Shankly, who said, “Some people believe football is a matter of life and death. I’m very disappointed with that attitude. I can assure you it is much, much more important than that.”⁵

In this Central-American ritual, sport had cosmic significance, and was used to reflect and perhaps regulate the relationship of humanity with the cosmos in the broadest sense, or its gods more particularly. Something similar can be seen much more recently in the aboriginal ball games of Native Americans. The Cherokee people engaged in a game that is often seen as the precursor to modern lacrosse, on a huge pitch with a goal at either end. When we read the accounts of these games now what strikes us are not only the similarities with modern sports (they are often more like modern rationalized sports than many traditional Western games, for instance) but the way in which the game is surrounded by religious ritual and preparation.⁶ The medicine men are present throughout the build-up and playing of the game, which could be extremely violent. The game is understood to be played in the presence of, and addressed

3. For a detailed description of the game and its variants see Schele and Miller, *Blood of Kings*, chapter VI.

4. For a description of this mural see Foster, *Ancient Maya*, 197.

5. See the beginning of chapter 5 for more on the context of this remark. It can be found online in *Mirror Football*, “Wit and Wisdom.”

6. “. . . the most obvious difference between ‘our’ sports and ‘theirs’ is the constant presence of medicine men and their performance of elaborate ritual acts which are, from our perspective, extraneous to the game.” Guttman, *Whole New Ball Game*, 19.

to, the Great Spirit, and players undergo ascetic preparation and engage in ritual chants and dances. The ball seems to have been thought of as sacred—perhaps representing the sun or the moon—and so cannot be touched by hand. When the men play the women dance and sing while watching. It appears that, as in Central America,⁷ women had their own versions of the game but that the ceremonial version was male only. The gender divide has a long sporting history. The Cherokee game was understood to be a means of assuring fertility for the tribe, its livestock, and land, as well as manipulating the weather. This sport is the vehicle by which humankind relates to greater powers. It is not so much true to say that this sport is *related to* religion as that it *is* religion.

The same might be said of other Native American games, such as the Apache relay races in which one team represented the sun and the animals, the other the moon and the plant world, and that was run across a track called the Milky Way—the course upon which the sun and moon “raced” each day. Similarly elaborate ritual preparations accompany the race, and once more the Great Spirit is invoked.⁸ Such sporting ritual may seem a very long way from contemporary sporting endeavor—though, as we shall see, there are also good reasons to compare them carefully and reflect upon that comparison. Modern sport has become, for participants and spectators, highly ritualized, and some athletes speak about their own competing in religious terms.

More familiar to most readers will be the ancient Olympic Games, often ascribed a special place in the history of Western thought and certainly narrated in the ideology of amateurism from the nineteenth century onwards. Homer tells us that the Olympic Games had been played for some centuries earlier, but they are traditionally dated to 776 BCE.⁹ This coincided with a population expansion and the founding of new city states, and some uniform organization was needed in order to allow competition that was not merely based on local conventions. Similar universalizing needs drive the development of modern sport in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As athletes from all over gathered in one place to compete, each bringing their own local version of the race, or the bout, some standardization was necessary. Again and again this is the reason for the codification of rules: to allow people from different

7. See Miller and Taube, *Ancient Mexico*, 43–44.

8. Guttman, *Whole New Ball Game*, 19–21.

9. Harris, *Sport*, 15.

localities to compete with one another. It was necessary to set the parameters of a contest (most basically, what counted as a legitimate win) when prize money and betting were involved. In disconcerting ways, given the generally idyllic view of historic sport, money raises its head even on Mount Olympus, and later more modern sports such as cricket also saw the codification of rules for such motives.

The ancient Greeks staged several cycles of games, each with a similar but distinct pattern. There were games at Delphi, Corinth, and Nemea as well as Olympus, and even then the games at Olympus were held every fourth year. The origin of the Olympus cycle of games is ultimately mysterious, though the subject of many a mythological explanation. Initially the games site was undeveloped with minimal spectator facilities and largely improvised competition space. But a stadium of some sort seems eventually to have been built here and in every Greek city of significance. Typically, they were rectangular, two hundred yards by forty yards with a starting line at each end and a divider up the middle with a turning post at each end of track. In mountainous countryside they usually had to be artificially created. But commodious conditions for athletes and spectators took a long time to develop.

Olympus had become a shrine to Zeus in about 1000 BCE and the games that developed there were probably held in his honor.¹⁰ Religious ceremonies were interwoven with the games in a pattern that became fixed around 450 BCE and that continued for many hundreds of years until their eventual demise in the disintegrating Roman Empire. The first day was one of religious ceremonies, with athletes and patrons making offerings and taking oaths. On the second day chariot-racing was followed by horse-racing in the morning, and the pentathlon was held in the afternoon. Day three had massive religious ceremonies in the morning and foot-racing events in the afternoon. On day four the combat events took place—boxing, wrestling, and the particularly violent *pankration*—a kind of no-holds-barred fighting. Then on the fifth and final day prizes were awarded, thanks offered to Zeus, and a huge celebratory banquet brought the games to a close.¹¹

The crowds who watched the games brought money to spend, and the glory of winning proved transferable—from competitors to sponsors

10. For an outline of the complex religio-sporting etiology of the games at Olympus see Drees, *Olympia*, 21–32. Harris, *Sport*, 16–17, plays down the religious importance of these games.

11. Baker, *Sports*, 16–21.

and supporters. Athletes would often be seen to represent wealthy patrons (who in earliest times received the prize rather than the athlete, as modern-day racehorse owners do) or even their city states. As winning brought glory and customers, participants began to be paid for their endeavors and a class of professional sportsman emerged. According to a nostalgic view, Greek sport *decays* into professionalism, and the standards of skill and fitness drove the amateurs out of competition (exactly the reason why some rugby union officials opposed professionalism, believing, rightly, that it would take the game at the highest level away from the ordinary players who would not be able to compete with those who had leisure and resources to train). But another theory suggests that such a view merely perpetuates the amateur ideology of nineteenth- and twentieth-century ruling bodies, and that “an ancient amateur is an anachronism.”¹² Indeed, the ancient prizes were already very valuable: the winner of the boys’ race in Athens received a prize one scholar estimates as the equivalent of \$45,000.¹³ With prize money, inevitably, came corruption. Races were fixed with bribes; collusion provided draws and shared prize money. Yet spectators remained passionate.

Scholars disagree on exactly what part religion played in the classical games. Certainly Greek sport thrived at religious festivals where large numbers assembled. But was it just a matter of the games coinciding with religious festivals, or was it—as was generally believed until more recently—that the games themselves had some continuing religious purpose, were a kind of offering or expiation, something given to please the gods? It is difficult to be definitive on the question of whether the games or the religious ceremony had initial and continuing priority, and whether or when there was a change in their symbiotic relationship. Religion was so enmeshed in ancient life, in social, political, and other practices, that it may be misleading even to pose the question in this way.

There appears to be a temptation for some contemporary scholars to downplay the religious element, perhaps reflecting the lesser social significance of contemporary religion in our society. The modern Olympic movement established by Pierre de Coubertin tries to distance itself from the more overtly religious interpretations,¹⁴ and talks instead of its *moral* vision, of helping to build “a peaceful and better world by educating

12. Golden, *Ancient Greece*, 142.

13. Golden, *Ancient Greece*, 142.

14. See IOC, “Ancient Olympic Games.”

youth through sport practiced without discrimination of any kind and in the Olympic spirit, which requires mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play.”¹⁵ It omits to tell us that de Coubertin had strong views on the role of women in sport (that they should be present only to applaud the men)—such information would be as unhelpful today as would favoring any religion. The Olympic Charter states that “Olympism is a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind. Blending sport with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy found in effort, the educational value of good example and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles.”¹⁶

It has to be said that “promoting ethics” sounds rather vague: *whose* ethics? De Coubertin actually spoke of a “religion of sport,”¹⁷ but it is clear also that he understood the religious element to be principally found in the taking of an oath to the spirit of fair play and amateurism.¹⁸ Sport has a history, and it is a history constantly written and rewritten from the perspectives of those with an interest of one sort or another.

Whatever has become of the ancient Olympics in their more modern iterations, in the ancient examples of sport that we have scanned we have seen sport fulfilling some sort of religious function. Sport and religion are congruent. It would be foolish to object to sport in such religious practice—they belong naturally together. This sport is a vehicle for, or manipulator of, divine energy, activity or communication. We have nothing quite like this in our contemporary sporting landscape. Perhaps the discourse of American evangelical sport comes closest. An American speed skater in the 2010 Vancouver Winter Games spoke of how he was “competing for God.”¹⁹ Milan footballer Kaka has “God is faithful” stitched into the tongues of his boots, and celebrates goals by raising a pointed figure to the sky as an act of praise. Countless footballers cross themselves when entering the field of play. Such rituals might seem mere superstition to the skeptic, but it would be wrong to dismiss all such practice out of hand in this way. Can sport be an expression of faith, an

15. IOC, “Commission for Culture.”

16. IOC, “Charter,” 12.

17. See his 1935 essay “Philosophic Foundations,” 131, in Carl-Diem-Institut, *Olympic Idea*, and quoted by Parry in “Olympism and Peace,” 208.

18. De Coubertin, “Opening Address,” 17, and quoted by Parry in “Olympism and Peace,” 207.

19. Fairchild, “Trevor Marsicano’s Faith.”

offering to the gods/God? Can sport be a means by which its participants, and perhaps even its spectators, reach for the heavens? Is it right to think of sports in these ways? And if it might be, what could we understand spectators to be doing as they sit in their thousands around the great shrines of contemporary sport—is there some vicarious, transferrable process taking place that allows them too to offer something to, or receive something from, a higher force? To these and other questions we will return.

“Keeping Company with the Devil”?

As we move away from the classical period and into the Middle Ages in the West we see a change in the relation of organized sports to religion. We can probably begin to trace this change to a more ambivalent and at times much more negative attitude in the Roman Empire with its “bread and circuses.” This famous phrase was penned by Juvenal in his tenth *Satire* to suggest that the mass of the Roman population had abnegated its political influence and activity and cared now only for food and entertainment. Entertainment, at least by their own standard, was what they got. Roman politicians competed with one another to outdo their rivals in games of increasing ostentation and cost for the first four hundred years of the Christian era. The stadia in which sporting events were staged in the later years of the empire were of staggering size, dwarfing Greek venues. Rome’s Circus Maximus, for instance, is thought to have held between 150,000 and 250,000 people. Like the Grecian games, Roman sport appears to have originated at religious festivals.²⁰ But they became a means of amusing a proletariat in danger of being bored or otherwise stirred to dissatisfaction with the regime. The games were used as a safety valve and a distraction. While Greek games clearly had some kind of military flavor, the Roman games valorized full-blooded warrior combat. Life was cheap in Roman sport. Centuries later Marxist critics would suggest that sport was a tool of capitalism in suppressing the masses; others would suggest, more neutrally, that sport served the vital function of social safety valve.²¹ Both of these interpretations of sport find some *prima facie* support in the Colosseum and Circus Maximus.

20. Köhne, “Bread and Circuses,” 9.

21. Guttman, *Spectators*, 147–48.

The chariot races divided supporters into partisan tribes of followers, and inscriptions have been found that show a dedication to one of the four (later two) main teams that appears to go beyond rational explanation and approximate rather eerily to modern football fanaticism.²² Charioteers were injured and even killed in their hectic races—but it was the gladiators who epitomized Roman attitudes to sport. Gladiatorial combat originated at funeral ceremonies as a way of celebrating the noble life of the departed, and proved such a compelling spectacle that it grew into a major sporting event attended by tens of thousands, with heroes and villains, and copious amounts of blood. Unlike most sporting competitors, these men (and sometimes women) were quite literally fighting for their lives in the arena. The combats proved useful not only as a means of controlling a restive population, but also as a way of disposing of certain undesirables. Because nearly all gladiators died eventually (they had to survive three years to have a chance of being allowed to leave the arena), criminals and prisoners of war could be sentenced to the gladiators' schools in what the authorities regarded as a win/win—it was the equivalent of the death sentence in reality, but gave the illusion of hope: the combatants received training and were given weapons, thereby getting more of a chance than those who were condemned to unarmed combat against some starved wild animals kept specifically for the purpose.

As well as criminals and prisoners of war, slaves were sometimes used in these games—especially if large numbers were required, as for Claudius' mock-up sea battle (though the deaths were real enough).²³ Some of the crimes punishable by the arena seem trivial to us, but others will sound more serious. High treason, for instance, could land a defendant in a gladiatorial school, and Christians were among those who were charged with high treason when they failed to comply with the requirements of the imperial religion. It is not surprising then that Christians were in the forefront of opposition to Roman games. They were not quite alone, and some Roman intellectuals carped that the games were barbaric and inhuman. But Christians, who might be said to have had a vested interest in opposing the Roman games, were consistently vehement. Around the turn of the second century CE, Ignatius wrote of them to

22. Guttman, *Spectators*, 28–30.

23. Nineteen thousand combatants participated in this typically extravagant Claudian event: Guttman, *Spectators*, 20.

the church in Rome as the “cruel tortures of the devil”²⁴ and Clement probably has martyrdom in the arena in mind when speaking of “many indignities and tortures.”²⁵ The most sustained attack came from Tertullian in his *On Spectacles*, written about a hundred years later around 200 CE. He has little respect for the spectators: “See the people coming to [the circus] already under strong emotion, already tumultuous, already passion-blind, already agitated about their bets. The praetor is too slow for them: their eyes are ever rolling as though along with the lots in his urn; then they hang all eager on the signal; there is the united shout of a common madness. Observe how ‘out of themselves’ they are by their foolish speeches.”²⁶

Tertullian’s concerns about a crowd taking on the character of a mob, blinded to rationality, driven by gambling, echo through the centuries of Christian commentary on sport. What happens to people when they gather in large numbers to watch sport? Are they somehow enlivened and exalted by this common experience, or are they diminished and degraded by it? Tertullian saw the choice as stark—Christians should avoid the games: “How many other undoubted proofs we have had in the case of persons who, by keeping company with the devil in the shows, have fallen from the Lord! For no one can serve two masters. What fellowship has light with darkness, life with death?”²⁷ Far from a means of reaching for the heavens, Tertullian and others saw these games as a descent into hades.

Tertullian also judges the contestants harshly. “I suppose [the boxer] received these caestus-scars, and the thick skin of his fists, and these growths upon his ears, at his creation! God, too, gave him eyes for no other end than that they might be knocked out in fighting! I say nothing of him who, to save himself, thrusts another in the lion’s way, that he may not be too little of a murderer when he puts to death that very same man on the arena.”²⁸

24. Ignatius, *Romans*, 5:3.

25. Clement, *First Epistle*, 6:1.

26. Tertullian, *On Spectacles*, XVI.

27. Tertullian, *On Spectacles*, XXVI.

28. Tertullian, *On Spectacles*, XXIII. A *caestus* was a glove worn in hand combat competitions such as boxing or pankration. Made from strips of leather, it often also contained metal plates or spikes giving it a rather more aggressive purpose than a modern boxing glove.

The games' origin in, and continued connection with, pagan religious rites were damning, and Tertullian saw them as an indication of the abuse of God's creation by God's creatures.²⁹ All in all, and not least because of the bloodshed, "these [games] are not consistent with true religion and true obedience to the true God."³⁰

It must be said that, Tertullian's objections notwithstanding, Christians did not always avoid the games. In fact, away from Rome where instances of Christians being martyred in the arena were less conspicuous, they often made their compromise with them. Even after Christianity became the religion of the empire in the fourth century the games were not banned but at first only prohibited on Sundays. It is often suggested that the games at Olympus were condemned by Theodosius (emperor from 379 to 395) because of their associations with pagan cults, but there is no official record of this. They did cease after the 392 games and it is possible that he had brought them to an end.³¹ However, when games did stop altogether through the empire, it is likely that the causes are to be found as much in the changing economic circumstances and general disintegration of the empire as in any genuine religious objections.

It would be wrong, however, to suggest that all the evidence of early Christian attitudes to sport is negative. There are the well-known allusions of the apostle Paul to sport in his letters. While it is true that Paul does not explicitly support sports in using the imagery of running the race, or wrestling with evil, winning the prize, and so on, there does seem to be an implicit approval in his references.³² It is almost certain that he has in mind the "purer" Greek forms of the games rather than the Roman crowd-pleasers. Clement of Rome, while referring negatively to the games as we have seen, is also among those borrowing its language to celebrate Christian martyrs whom he refers to as "those champions who lived nearest to our time."³³ Here there can be no doubt that the more barbaric Roman games shape the imagery in question.

It will seem obvious to us that Christians should oppose a sport that involved state-sanctioned killing, and opposition to gladiatorial combat in particular seems unexceptional. But we should also note the attacks on

29. Tertullian, *On Spectacles*, III.

30. Tertullian, *On Spectacles*, I.

31. Some connect his opposition to the Olympics with his concern about the role of women in pagan cultic practice. See Gill, "Chapters."

32. See the discussion of Paul's athletic imagery in chapter 4.

33. Clement, *First Epistle*, 5:1.

the games more generally. They often focus on what is seen as an abuse of God's creation by those made in God's image,³⁴ and upon the dangers inherent in spectating—mob mentality, gambling, drunkenness and other vices (brothels were usually sited close to the arenas). Both of these lines of attack will resurface after the Reformation but in the meantime, as in the Roman Empire, Christians often made their peace with popular entertainment, and even (as with Paul) appear to have nodded approvingly in its direction or given mixed messages on the subject (Clement).

As the religious festivals of Greece and Rome had been hosts of sport, this was to be the pattern in Christian Europe through the Middle Ages, though our knowledge of games and sports in the period is sketchy. There was something like bowling in Germany, something like shinty and hurling in Scotland and Ireland respectively, and judging from the comments of the Bishop of Clermont, something like football in France as early as the fifth century. As Christianity spread throughout Europe during this time its missionaries were by no means encouraged to stamp out local pastimes, even when linked with older pagan practices. According to Bede, writing in the eighth century,³⁵ Pope Gregory wrote in 601 to Abbot Mellitus, who was about to join the mission to England, that pagan temples should not be destroyed but only the idols in them—suggesting a policy of accommodation, of recycling pagan practice as Christian. The church in France, we know, adopted some ancient ball games into its Easter celebrations.³⁶ But more generally the church appears to have provided the framework for the playing of games through the sequence of holy days and Sundays.

The variety of games played in the Middle Ages is striking, though few of them could properly be called sports at this time, lacking the necessary bureaucracy and uniformity. Perhaps the tournament jousting of the aristocracy and gentry comes as close as anything, though following a number of fatalities which provoked ecclesiastical opposition the game of quintain began to take over in which knights jousted against a shield mounted on a rotating arm. The wealthy hunted, with the king often

34. Tertullian, *On Spectacles*, II.

35. "... the temples of the idols in that nation ought not to be destroyed; but let the idols that are in them be destroyed; let holy water be made and sprinkled in the said temples, let altars be erected, and relics placed. For if those temples are well built, it is requisite that they be converted from the worship of devils to the service of the true God." Bede, *History*, Book I, chapter 30.

36. Baker, *Sports*, 45.

closely controlling the land on which hunting could take place. Games rather like hockey, football, and other ball games such as bowls; combat of various sorts (including archery); sports involving animals that could be extremely cruel to our modern eyes; and various racing games—all these and more were regular occurrences. They were also, however, very local affairs with no fixed rules, and without common patterns of play. Sport as a separate category of *thing* was unknown: contemporary accounts will, as late as the seventeenth century, speak of dancing and the theatre and games as if they are the same kinds of activities.

But games, alongside other forms of leisure, thrived on church occasions and often on church property with the church yard or cloisters often used for this purpose especially if there was no suitable common land. It is true that there seems to have been an ambivalence about the church's attitude here, though it may be going too far to say that it was merely tolerated and that the church in general had little time for it.³⁷ There were sporadic attempts to discourage clergy from playing dice, and wrestling, as well as hunting and hawking, but these attempts were rarely successful.

Gloucester Cathedral has a medieval carving of what appears to be football, and its fourteenth-century great east window has a depiction of an early form of golf—or is it hockey? Their inclusion in this sacred space does not suggest hostility to games, and might even be taken to suggest the blessing of some of them at least.³⁸ Churchyard gates served for the locals as football goals, church walls were used for ball games, and churchyard yews were plundered by archers in need of a bow. In the middle of the fourteenth century the Archbishop of York banned “wrestlings, shootings or plays,” and a hundred years later a far broader list was issued, including bowling, tennis, handball, football, stoolball, and “all manner of other games.”³⁹ Perhaps the church authorities were less enamored than the ordinary clergy on the ground, but none of the interdictions seemed really to stick, and their protestations will have a familiar ring to contemporary church councils who have tried to prevent damage to the parish hall by the youth club. The authorities in general favored archery, and anything else that might help ready a man for military service. But the ordinary people just liked to have a good time on their day off.

37. As Brailsford suggests: *British Sport*, 12, *passim*.

38. See Gloucester Cathedral, “The Gloucester Golfer.”

39. Brailsford, *British Sport*, 14.

Early forms of football are particularly colorful, and, it must be said, violent. Often played over vast areas, with “goals” miles apart, they were mass participation events. One of these games, the Haxey Hood, was played in Lincolnshire since at least the fourteenth century, and has recently been annually reenacted.⁴⁰ A quaint story was probably superimposed upon an ancient fertility game, and historians now generally consider that its origin lies not in the chivalrous recovery of m’lady’s garments, but in “the conflict over an animal or even human head, whose blood would be held to make fruitful the fields of the victors . . . or to prosper their fishing.”⁴¹ Played over a dozen acres of land, with thirteen named characters and a boozy cast of hundreds, the winning team has to get the “hood” to their pub while three other teams have similar ideas. There were few rules beyond that, and the result appears to have been pretty chaotic. Football, like all these games, was always a local phenomenon, sometimes more orderly but usually sprawling and tending towards the rough. We find some stories of how such games could be used to settle local scores, and hide nefarious intent. The record of a game at North Moreton in Oxfordshire in May 1598, for instance, describes the sort of primitive football game that would have been common all over the country during the preceding centuries. But at this game two players were killed by an opponent, and there was cause to suspect that it may not have been entirely accidental.⁴²

Where the church did have clear misgivings was not so much with the games themselves as with what often came with them. Football games were inevitably rough but sometimes, as at North Moreton, worse. Sometimes the game was not so rough, but an admixture of alcohol could quickly change that. Some games could damage property, including church property. Attracting large numbers of people, crowd problems could easily follow. The notion of “spectator” is often inappropriate here—the traditional football matches, for instance, did not really have spectators, everyone played in one way or another. But the crowds who gathered tended to drink, gamble, and otherwise cavort. When women

40. Peacock, *Hood-Game*, 331–32, suggests that at the end of the nineteenth century there were concerns that the traditional game might be fading. The game, which set neighbor against neighbor with its slogan “Hoose agin hoose, toon agin toon, and if you meet a man knock him doon” (341) appears to have revived, even if in a tongue-in-cheek, and more civilized form. See YouTube video: “Haxey Hood 2012.”

41. Brailsford, *British Sport*, 2.

42. See Sharp, *Bewitching*, 14–19.

took part in racing they often slit their dresses at the side so that they could run more easily, or made other brazen adjustments to their clothing. Some worried that it was not just running that was made easier by such adjustments. Games on a saint's day could become raucous and get out of hand. But it is a mixed picture, and the church liked to have it both ways, often sponsoring these events as "Church Ales" that would raise money for the parish.

While Gloucester Cathedral's artwork might suggest an acceptance of games, even a blessing of them in some quarters, it is difficult to suggest that they had any recognized or valued sacred element to them. Medieval game players were not engaged in the same sort of activity as the Mayan ball players, the athletes at Olympus, or even the Cherokee and Apache "lacrosse" players and runners. They did not appear to be reaching for the heavens in their games so much as enjoying a break from the more grinding routines of their lives. But the authorities saw that, while games were usually as socially stratified as the societies in which we find them, they could also seem somewhat anarchic—dangerous to persons, property, morality, and good order. It is with this in mind that we see some interesting and opposite developments in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

The rediscovery of classical culture in the Renaissance brought a new appreciation of the aesthetics of the human body, including a positive evaluation of athletic exercise. It may be helpful to speak of a north/south divide here, with Southern Europe having a more inclusively aesthetic and Northern Europe a more strictly intellectual perspective.⁴³ Certainly this seems to reflect the contours of the Reformation, and others can decide on cause and effect here. In Italy in 1528 Castiglione published *The Book of the Courtier*, in which he recognized that life at court required an easy facility with both recreations and manners, as well as a certain military preparedness. In England Sir Thomas Elyot had probably read Castiglione and warmed to his theme in *The Boke Named the Governour*, first published in 1531. He was particularly interested in the education of gentlemen, and suggested that all study and no exercise would exhaust "the spirites vitall," affect digestion, and increase vulnerability to sickness.⁴⁴ There seems to be a basic, intuitive physiology in Elyot's advocacy of wrestling, swimming, fencing, riding, hunting, archery—and dancing.

43. See Baker, *Sports*, 72–74.

44. Elyot, *Governour*, 74.

He quotes Augustine in his defense of dancing, who, he argues, was not against dancing as such but only its pagan forms that could lead to fornication. Elyot thought that cards and backgammon could quicken a man's wit, whereas dicing was likely to lead to vice.

Richard Mulcaster, in a treatise on education in 1581, appears to go further than Elyot or Castiglione, and seems to have read and digested a good deal of the argument of another Italian, Girolamo Mercuriale, who had published on the subject a dozen years earlier. Mulcaster was interested in the education of all social groups, and spent quite a considerable time on games. He describes the soul and body as "co-partners in good and ill, sweete and sowre, in mirth and mourning"⁴⁵ and as such should be trained together. Mulcaster tries to define the nature of health and sickness with a primitive biology based on the four elements, and argues that exercise has a role in maintaining equilibrium. Different kinds of exercise can achieve different results. He includes wrestling, walking, fencing, running, leaping, swimming, riding, hunting, shooting, and ball games in his exercise curriculum before going on to argue that football too had considerable potential. He suggests that tutors should act as referees to curb the violent tendencies often associated with the game. Perhaps through Mercuriale, he seems aware of the Italian game *calcio* (still the Italian word for soccer) that was played each year in Florence and was more closely regulated than traditional football in England—with equal teams and a clearly marked pitch.⁴⁶ Mulcaster appears unique as an Elizabethan advocate of football in England.

But among these various attempts to suggest a usefulness in games we do not find much attempt at a theological vindication of them. Strangely, perhaps, the nearest we come to this is in the infamous *Book of Sports* published by James I in 1618.⁴⁷ Puritans in Lancashire had been making life difficult for their fellows who enjoyed traditional pastimes after church on Sundays and on other feast days. To the Puritans all this seemed blatant Sabbath-breaking. James' response may not be profound theology, but it claims a missiological motive. Catholics of the county will think Protestantism entirely without enjoyment if they may not even play their games on Sunday afternoons and saints' days, he argues, and so

45. Mulcaster, *Training Up of Children*, 51.

46. To watch a reenactment of *calcio* see YouTube videos, "Calcio Storico Fiorentino."

47. James I, *The Kings Majesties Declaration to His Subjects Concerning Lawfull Sports to be Used* is colloquially referred to as *The Book of Sports*.

will be less likely to convert. But a second reason sounds more sinister: ordinary people will be prevented from the exercise that they need to be ready for military service. He is also afraid that, if prevented from play, the poor especially will simply be idle and drunk—an interesting objection given Puritan concerns. After all, if they cannot play on these occasions, when can they, being otherwise always at work? The existing Sunday laws should be enforced, James insisted, and if Puritans did not like the laws of the land they could find another land. Violent recreations were still banned, as was—curiously—bowling for “the meaner sort of People.”⁴⁸ But church remained the first Sunday duty, and those who did not attend were also to be denied lawful recreations. James ruled that his book was to be read from pulpits across the land, causing uproar with many clergy refusing to comply. His book became a continued source of resentment among Puritans.

The opposite movement to that in Renaissance humanistic education did, however, come from a decidedly theological source. The Puritans have become known for a sour objection to any form of pleasure, including games and sport. The reality is, as might be expected, more nuanced.

While the continental Reformers stood on the northern side of the Renaissance divide mentioned above, their attitude to games was by no means wholly negative. Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli both valued physical fitness: Luther commended gymnastics and wrestling among other pursuits, and Zwingli saw the military value of exercise. Calvin was more cautious: he played quoits and bowls, but took a hard line on cards, dice, and gambling generally.⁴⁹ But while Calvin inherited a seedy Geneva waiting to be cleaned up, all three operated in their pomp in contexts where they could set the tone. The English Puritans, by contrast, found themselves in a more contested situation. As early as the sixteenth century, with the English Reformation not going far or deep enough for their convictions, Puritans were beginning to have an influence on lifestyle matters that was disproportionate to their numbers.

There were two principal types of objection to games articulated by the Puritans, and we see them clearly in Phillip Stubbes’ *The Anatomie of Abuses*, published in 1583. The first relates to the breaking of the Sabbath in particular, but also relates to more general calendar issues. For

48. James I, *Declaration*, 8.

49. Brailsford, *Sport and Society*, 38; Hill, *Society and Puritanism*, 170.

Stubbes and his fellows the Sabbath was a day for listening to God's Word in sermons, marveling at the Creator and his creation, and for resting. It was not a day, therefore, for feasts (including the Church Ales organized by the church itself), or playing any kind of game—or indeed for “reading of lascivious and wanton books, and an infinit number of such like practices and prophane exercises used upon that Day, whereby the Lord God is dishonoured, his Sabaoth violated, his word neglected, his Sacraments contemned and his People marvelously corrupted, and caryed away from true virtue and godlynes.”⁵⁰ Some recreations showed pagan or popish aspects, and the Puritan opposition to games on the Sabbath also included all the saints' days when ordinary people refrained from work, and played. There were a considerable number of these in the year, and there may be an interesting socioeconomic aspect to Puritan opposition: Puritans tended to be urban and were more likely to be in business or commerce.⁵¹ They defended their right (and that of their employees!) to work six days each week without interruption from saints' days—and after six days' hard work, rest was an appropriate way to spend the Sabbath. Sabbath observance was already on the statute book, Puritans wanted existing laws enforced, and as their influence grew court records show that they managed to ensure this in a patchy way across the country.

The other main objection to recreations was, again, less to the recreations themselves but more to do with the type of behavior that often accompanied them. For Christians to play cards or bowls together, without gambling, was acceptable to Stubbes—but those who won money were no better than robbers in taking money that they had not earned.⁵² But despite this concession Stubbes called bowls “brothel bowls” and complained that it leads to swearing, blaspheming, and “Whordome, Theft, Robberie, Deceit, Fraude, Cosenage, fighting Quareling, and Sometymes Murder . . . drinking, beggerie.”⁵³ Football attracted particular censure as one of those practices that lured men into sin. It is better described as “a freendly kinde of fight, then a play or recreation. A bloody and murthering practice, then a felowly sporte or pastime. For doth not everyone lye

50. Stubbes, “The Manner of Sanctifying The Sabaoth in Aligna,” in *Anatomie of Abuses*.

51. See Hill, *Society and Puritanism*, 153–59, 191.

52. Stubbes, “Cards, Dice, Tables, Tennisse, Bowles, and other exercises, vsed unlawfully in Aligna,” *Anatomie of Abuses*.

53. Stubbes, “Cards, Dice, Tables, Tennisse, Bowles, and other exercises, vsed unlawfully in Aligna,” *Anatomie of Abuses*.

in waight for his Aadversarie, seeking to overthrowe him and picke him on his nose, though it be upon hard stones, in ditch or dale, in valley or hill, or what place soever it be, hee careth not so he haue him down.”⁵⁴

The inherent violence of football creates particular problems, and is not unconnected from the energetic opposition to sports such as cock-fighting and bear-baiting, though the Puritans seem to have been more concerned with public than with private recreation, and more with the recreation of ordinary working people than with those of the gentry: hunting, for instance, escaped lightly. One kind of behavior to which any of these recreations might lead was idleness. Time was a precious gift from God for the Puritans, and had to be invested carefully and with an eye to its productive outcome—whether for the soul or the pocket.⁵⁵

Stubbes’ polemic has one other feature worth noting. He records a number of disasters interpreted as divine judgment for Sabbath-breaking in particular. There was a considerable popular appetite for such stories, and while there may be some exaggeration in Stubbes’ accounts they seem generally accurate. One such instance is the collapse of the spectator gallery at the Paris Gardens Bear Pit in London on a Sunday in January 1583. Other contemporary accounts suggest that the wooden supports were rotten, but Stubbes sees the cause of this disaster in divine vengeance.⁵⁶

There are more moderate voices than Stubbes⁵⁷ but the general drift is similar, and retains the ambivalence we see in Stubbes on bowls, for instance: acceptable sometimes, “brothel bowls” another time. In fact, we might make sense of much of this ambivalence by understanding the Puritans as favoring moderation in recreations, and noting that they are less intrinsically opposed to many pastimes than they are either to their occasion (Sundays, saints’ days), their accompaniment (drunkenness, gambling, general moral laxity), or their consequences (vice, idleness).

54. Stubbes, “A fearful Iudgement of God shewed at the Theaters,” *Anatomie of Abuses*.

55. George Herbert reflects this fear of idleness among the wealthier in his *The Country Parson*, the earliest pastoral theology written in English, published posthumously in 1652.

56. Stubbes, “A fearful Iudgement of God shewed at the Theaters,” *Anatomie of Abuses*; see also Pearson, “Composition,” 323–24.

57. For instance, Lawrence Humphrey, whose *The Nobles* cautiously advocated moderate exercise.