

Article

# In Praise of God: Sport as Worship in the Practice and Self-Understanding of Elite Athletes

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**Abstract:** The relationships between sport and religion have been examined from a number of perspectives, and parallels between sporting activity and worship are often observed, positively or negatively. Elite sports participants often perform religious gestures and many speak of their sporting performance in terms of their religious faith, including the assertion that it constitutes an act of worship. The authors begin by considering the nature of Christian worship, examining worship as a phenomenon, key biblical and theological ideas, the relationship of worship to sacred places and times, and the relation of worship to everyday life. The self-understanding of elite athletes of faith is then considered, as articulated in interviews collected over several years with one of the authors and in other published statements. This data is then mapped back on to the previously considered ideas of worship. The article suggests that, while the correspondence may not be complete or exact, there is good reason to take seriously the claims of elite athletes of faith that their sporting performance should be regarded as an act of worship.

**Keywords:** sport and religion; sport and worship; worship; elite athletes and faith

## 1. Introduction

This essay considers the coherence of the notion that sportspersons' participation in competition might properly be construed as a form of worship. It does so by examining what we mean by worship and then scrutinizes the testimony of around one hundred Christian elite athletes in interviews with one of the authors, alongside similar evidence from other sources. Does their own understanding of their activity correspond to typical concepts of worship? We will argue that it does. This article does not attempt to provide an exhaustive account of the subject, but to offer an indicative and reliable impression of the self-understanding of elite athletes of faith.

## 2. Worship

Before considering whether it is appropriate to speak of Christians 'worshipping God in sport' we first need to pause and ask, what *is* worship? This is both an important and difficult task. Once we have in mind a satisfactory definition (or definitions) we may determine whether what sportsmen and women report can be appropriately described as worship. The liturgical scholar James F. White remarks that the concept of "worship" is "exasperatingly difficult to pin down" (White 2000, p. 17; see also Carson 2002, p. 14). He suggests that there are three ways in which we might approach the task: by examining the phenomenon of worship itself; by considering key historical-theological definitions; and by examining the vocabulary associated with worship. Biblical considerations inform each of these perspectives and perhaps figure most obviously in the final one. We will consider each of these briefly and in turn, before broadening our inquiry to other issues.

### 2.1. The Phenomenon of Worship

Worship, as opposed to personal devotion, is a social activity with a communal dimension, and what we think of as worship, even in evangelical traditions, generally consists of repetitive social behavior often described as a ritual. Christians have developed a number of stable and enduring forms (see White 2000, pp. 19–20, 30) of worship over many centuries which have macro calendrical aspects to them (seasons and festivals, and the use of Sunday as a special ‘set apart’ day) and particular repeating microforms (e.g., Communion services, which can look very different and still retain a common core across different traditions). Christian worship today is continuous in certain important ways with the worship of the early church which in turn owed a great deal to Jewish synagogue worship. However, while this continuity is apparent, it is also true that forms of Christian worship develop, adapt, and change.<sup>1</sup>

When we look at worship as a social phenomenon we will notice other things too. For instance, we will observe that worship usually involves a group of people being led by one or two others. This leading, and the status and role of leaders, varies enormously but some individuals adopt (or are given) a distinct role as priests, preachers, leaders. These have a function in enabling others to worship as they worship themselves, and the relationship of sports competitors to sports crowds has sometimes been likened to this.

One other aspect of the ‘ritual’ dimension of worship is worth mentioning. Christian worship is often associated with particular ‘holy places.’ There is considerable variation in the way in which Christian theologians assess the significance of such special places, but the historic fact is that Christians have continued to regard certain buildings as especially significant, and sometimes other types of places too. Even in ‘low’ church traditions Christian communities often do not believe that the ‘sanctuary’ should be used for ‘secular’ purposes, for instance.<sup>2</sup>

### 2.2. Historical and Theological Perspectives

As we might anticipate there is something of a difference between how major theological thinkers of the Christian church have tried to distill the essence of worship, depending upon the particular Christian tradition in which the theologians are located—though these differences may not be quite as great as at first imagined, at least at the level of generality at which we are working.

As Crichton put it: “Because it is God who always takes the initiative, Christian worship is best discussed in terms of *response*” (Crichton 1978, p. 7, italics his). The Protestant reformers often spoke of worship as a dialogue in which God speaks and humans respond and contemporary forms reflect this in a number of ways. Worship is seen as a response to God’s action (particularly in Jesus) and to his call upon us to respond. In a Trinitarian view of worship, God is the initiator and enabler of worship as the Holy Spirit moves us (Torrance 1996, pp. 18–22). Thomas Cranmer, the genius of the Book of Common Prayer, thought of worship as the glorification of God, and the calling to and enabling of godly living of God’s people.<sup>3</sup> This is remarkably similar to Pius XII’s affirmation in the middle of the 20th century,<sup>4</sup> and not so different from the way many a contemporary charismatic Christian might define worship (Webber 1994, pp. 121–34). The famous first question of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* of 1647 asked “what is the chief end of man?” The response: “to glorify God and to enjoy him

<sup>1</sup> Ecstatic worship, which appears to have been a feature of New Testament worship, for instance, has re-emerged in the last century or so. Worship generally is predictable and repetitive but can also display freedom and spontaneity.

<sup>2</sup> There is an irony to this when one considers the pre-Reformation practice of using the local church as the village hall-cum-animal store (see Davies 1968).

<sup>3</sup> Cranmer’s explanation (in a chapter entitled ‘Of ceremonies’) in the first *Book of Common Prayer* (Church of England 1549) is that worship comprises “the setting forth of goddes honor, and glorye: and to the reducing of the people to a moste perfect and Godly living.”

<sup>4</sup> Pius XII speaks of worship as “to the glory of God and the spiritual profit of Christians,” (Pius XII (Pius 1947), §49), a phrase borrowed from one of his predecessors Pius X a half century before (Pius X (Pius 1903), §1.1).

forever” (Westminster Assembly 1647). This foundational exchange implies that humans are created to worship God and to give God glory—to worship (Forrester et al. 1996, p. 2).

Mystery is also a key element of worship. Whether in praise, eucharist, or the sense of being addressed personally in a sermon, God resists manipulation and comprehension. Worship is a matter of grace. In this mystery comes communion—all Christian traditions regard worship as enabling unity with God, variously understood, from the deepening of the personal relationship with Christ of Evangelical worship to the divinization of the believer in Orthodox worship (Luther understood this to be one of the functions of the mass: Luther 1960, p. 51).

Another important concept, though typically more familiar in Catholic traditions, is sacrament. Through the material form, God gives God’s self to God’s people—through the bread and wine of communion, for instance. Since Vatican II ideas of sacrament have received much attention and the notion of a ‘sacramental universe’ has become common (Macquarrie 1997, pp. 1–11; Sheldrake 2001, p. 65). Thus understood, all of God’s creation has the potential to become the means by which God communicates God’s self, with the ecclesial sacraments being the paradigm for divine activity. Rooted in an understanding of the significance of the incarnation, it is affirmed that God in Christ “generously endorses materiality” and this, in turn, means that we can see the intrinsic value, and potential for a divine encounter, in the material and in embodied activity (White 2018, p. 102; Brown 2004).

These extremely brief theological characterizations of worship risk eliding real differences in the quest for commonality. However, they do give us a clue as to what, in broad terms, is ‘going on’ in those rituals and practices that we identified at the beginning of our exploration of the meaning of worship. We now turn to examine particular words and phrases from Scripture.

### 2.3. The Vocabulary of Worship: Biblical Basics

Both writers and many of the elite athletes whose testimony we are considering are rooted in evangelical traditions, so the turn to Scripture is important. However, turning to Scripture will involve us in the perils of translation and exegesis. The English word ‘worship’ appears to derive from the Old English *weorthscipe*, a term that signified the offering of respect or esteem to another. Of what Biblical terms is our ‘worship’ often used as a translation? In the Old Testament, the Hebrew term *shachah* lies behind most of the occurrences of ‘worship’ in English bibles, though it is worth noting that it is not always translated in this way and that the devotion described in the Hebrew text is sometimes offered to human beings rather than God. In the New Testament, the Greek term *proskuneo* is the most common word to mean worship, but several other words are also translated as worship.

Through these various terms we can see that the Old and New Testaments contain a number of commands to worship God (Ex 23:25; Ps 99:5; Ps 99:9; Ezek 46:3; Matt 4:10), and significantly, also many commands or warnings against the worship of other gods. The English word ‘worship’ and its cognates occur many times in our translations,<sup>5</sup> but no Biblical reference to worship offers a clear definition of it. References are generally descriptive or narrative statements. The many texts confirm the importance of worship but give us little direct help in understanding how worship was understood by biblical writers. Of course, as well as words translated as ‘worship,’ other vocabulary also relates to the activity. An important set of references in both Testaments, for instance, are those which speak of ‘giving glory’ to God (e.g., I Chron 16:24; Ps 19:1; Luke 2:14; Rev 19:7). At Matt 5:16, we may note, it is the good works of Jesus’ listeners that will glorify God rather than participation in any religious rite or act of devotion. Jesus makes a clear connection between worshipping and ordinary living to which we will return. Paul’s language of presenting our whole selves (indeed, he speaks of “bodies”) as worship suggests something similar (Rom 12:1).

<sup>5</sup> Carson (2002, p. 15) exposes some of the translational complexity when he notes that several Greek and Hebrew words in the Bible are sometimes rendered in English as ‘worship’ and sometimes not, and that “for almost any definition of worship there are many passages that have a bearing on this subject that do not use the Hebrew or Greek word that could be rendered by the word worship itself.” e.g., Matt. 4:10.

Worship in the Old Testament involved prayers and readings in the synagogue and the offering of sacrifices at the Temple in Jerusalem and local shrines, but we are never given a full description of such ‘services’ (Drane 1986, p. 120). The Book of Psalms is generally agreed to be the ‘hymn book’ of the restored Temple after the exile in Babylon, and in the Psalms worship is often associated with music and praise, and even with dancing (2 Chron 29:28–30; Ps 100:2; 149:3). Worship would typically involve a celebration of God’s goodness in creation and in history and recognize the grace of God in establishing covenants with his people. Special festivals focused on these acts of celebration, notably the Passover, which recalled the Exodus and God’s liberating of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt.

Walter Brueggemann describes the worship of the Old Testament as an “act of redescription” whereby the mundane world, both domestic and public, is understood afresh as the sphere of God’s action (Brueggemann 2002, p. 236), and the “redescription” of sport as worship also leads to a fresh understanding of the sporting sphere, as we shall see. By contrast, a number of texts appear to indicate that those outside the historic people of God nevertheless worship God (Acts 13:16; Dan 6:25–27), and others that such people obey God—sometimes without knowing it (as with Cyrus of Persia, Isa 45:103). This may suggest that it is possible to worship God without realizing that that is what we are doing—suggesting a line of research into the reported experiences of sport which are *not* described by the protagonists as worship but may be understood as worship along the line suggested in this essay. Perhaps in tension with this, though, in both the Old and New Testaments, clear statements say that that worship is not a ritual but must be sincere and come from the heart, suggesting intentionality (Isa 29:13; Matt 15:9; Mark 7:7).

#### 2.4. *Worship and ‘Sacred Spaces’ and ‘Sacred Times’*

As well as the daily pattern of prayer for the devout Jew, ancient Israel had a special day for worship, the Sabbath. The Old Testament also has a number of specific places where God is habitually worshipped: the tabernacle, on a particular holy mountain, in Hebron, in Jerusalem, in the Temple, at his sanctuary, and in the house of the Lord (Ex 3:12; Josh 22:27; 2 Sam 12:20; 15:8, 32; 2 Kings 18:22; Ezra 7:19; Is 27:13). However, while these places were special, worship could also be offered anywhere (1 Kings 1:47). Worship was not necessarily confined to special times or special places however much it might be focused on them.

While Jesus appears to have observed both the Sabbath and daily prayer times, his conversation with the Samaritan woman (John 4:21–23) is often regarded as significant and understood to indicate a complete loosening of worship from special places. However, Carson helpfully remarks that the development, of which this is a signal, indicates “not so much of a desacralization of space and time and food, as . . . a sacralization of all space and all time” (Carson 2002, p. 40). This observation chimes with the understanding of a sacramental universe already discussed.

The earliest Christian communities, initially at least, appear to have taken up the worship practices of Judaism more or less unchanged, attending the Temple daily and observing the traditional hours of prayer (Acts 2:46; 3:1; 5:21; *passim*). Concurrently, new patterns develop in home meetings, involving worship, prayer, teaching, and the breaking of bread (Acts 2:42; 5:42). It is likely that they recited the Lord’s Prayer, and possibly the Shema, as all Jews were required to do (Deut 6:4–9). However, there was also, quite soon, enormous variety (Dunn 1977, pp. 124–49). In time Christians found that they could worship God everywhere and discover Jesus’ presence with them in all places. However, they did, in various ways and with local variations, continue to think that they could most effectively worship God in places where relational and visual cues could be found—in ‘church buildings’—where they could allow the symbols of faith to evoke a sense of divine presence and saving mystery.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Such places did not contain God as the Old Testament also realized: while the impression is sometimes given that God ‘lived’ in the Temple, 2 Chron. 6:18 records Solomon praying at the dedication of the Temple, “But will God really dwell on earth with humans? The heavens, even the highest heavens, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!”

### 2.5. Worship and the Whole of Life

Christian spirituality has always reflected an understanding that worship can be expressed through a grace-filled life in the here and now (Bonar 1866). Given this, it is strange that in ordinary speech the term ‘worship’ so often refers exclusively to what Christians do in church buildings on Sundays: narrowing the scope of ‘worship’ to a particular time and place. This is a partial truth that needs further examination.

The relationship between Sunday worship and the rest of human life is complex and two-way. It is opened up further if the two activities or spheres are seen as in some way congruent. In his primer on leading worship in the Free Church tradition, Christopher Ellis discusses the multi-faceted relationship of worship to ‘life.’ He stresses that Sunday worship is not to be considered an escape from life, a metaphorical comfort blanket, or a distraction technique. The incarnation of God in Christ reminds us of God’s involvement with the world, and “real, authentic, ‘truly spiritual’ worship will have a strong connection with the rest of our existence” (Ellis 2009, p. 29). He talks about this “strong connection” in several ways and suggests that worship helps us “pay attention” (Ellis 2009, p. 30) as both God and God’s world are brought into sharper focus through it.

He goes on to describe Sunday Worship as “practice and rehearsal.” It is a way in which we “practice living in a Christian way and when we rehearse the attitudes, insights, and intentions which will be an important part of living for God in God’s world” (Ellis 2009, pp. 30–31). When we give thanks to God we are learning to see the world as a gift from God; when we confess our sins we are learning to be forgiven and to practice forgiveness; when we pray for the world we are being formed as those who care for others, and our subsequent actions may be shaped. Thus, he argues that worship is a kind of laboratory or classroom where—under controlled conditions—we experiment in forgiving and living thankfully, and so on (for a similar idea see Forrester et al. 1996, p. 14).

The third “strong connection” he makes between worship and the rest of life is as an act of dedication. In worship we offer ourselves—all we are and have—to God through Christ and in the power of the Spirit. Our prayers and praise, our talents and possessions, our relationships, and our desire to follow Jesus, are all offered to God. Helpfully for our purposes he reminds us that “this offering of ourselves to God isn’t the dedication of some kind of disembodied self, it is the offering of who we are—our social selves, *our lives at work and play* and in relationship, it is *the offering of our lives in the world, not just some spiritual self at worship ‘in church’*” (Ellis 2009, p. 32, italics ours). Crichton, commenting more generally on the human response in worship to the divine initiative says that “man [sic] can respond with the whole of his being, with mind and body, with his senses, in word and song and *movement*” (Crichton 1978, p. 15).

These three aspects of worship suggest a seamlessness between Sunday worship and the living of a worshipful life: our corporate worship focuses on God in the world, it is a kind of practicing for Christian living, and it is itself an offering of the whole of our lives away from Sunday worship to God. These points taken together indicate a congruence between Sunday worship and living faithful lives. In geometry, two congruent objects have the same size and shape as one another—one can fit on top of the other exactly. Sunday worship and Christian living should be congruent in this way. Sunday worship is not an escape from our lives, but it is focusing in a particular moment; then in Christian living, we act out the offering of our whole selves which we have articulated in response to bread and wine, gospel story, and sung praise—just as Jesus says that our good works might glorify God. Both Sunday services and daily living alike are, properly, worship—but worship in different modes, one the mirror of the other. The offering of ourselves in worship and in living is an offering of our whole selves—“our lives at work and play”. This points us towards the possibility of worshipping through play, and for professional sportspersons through the ‘work’ of their play. Barclay made a similar point commenting on Rom 12: 1, remarking that “real worship is something which sees the whole world as the temple of the living God, and every common deed an act of worship” (Barclay 1971, p. 169). He makes it more explicit and down to earth: “A man may say, ‘I am going to church to worship God,’ but he should also be able to say, ‘I am going to the factory, the shop, the office, the school, the garage,

the locomotive shed, the mine, the shipyard, the field, the byre, the garden, to worship God.” Barclay could and would have added sport to that list as, while serving as a Church of Scotland minister, he ran a church football team.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. Worship and Sport

Having made these initial remarks about worship we shall now turn to consider evidence that elite sportspersons might legitimately consider their sporting activity as worship. The evidence we will use will be largely transcriptions of a series of interviews conducted by Weir with elite athletes of Christian faith over a period of fourteen years. These transcribed interviews yield approximately 300,000 words ranging over a variety of themes but sharing the common thread of the athletes’ self-understanding of the intersection of their sport and their faith. Elements of these interviews deal explicitly with the issue of ‘sporting worship,’ while other parts of the interviews do so in a less direct way. The athletes concerned often describe their competitive sport as a kind of worship and we will attempt to map their observations on to the more general discussion of worship which we have just concluded. It is not, of course, possible to extrapolate from this sample to every Christian sports participant, but we believe the evidence base is substantial enough to allow some tentative conclusions.

#### 3.1. Methodology: The Interviews

At the outset, it is well to note an important feature of the interview data. The interviews upon which we will draw were not conducted with this particular research question in mind but were configured more generally to allow athletes to talk about the relationship of their faith to their sport. As well as using other published evidence, the 120 interviews with Weir took place over a period of fourteen years. The interviews were entirely unstructured in form, much more like natural conversations than focused research interrogations in order to allow natural and relaxed observations. The interviewer generally asked open questions that allowed the interviewee to take the conversation into topics where they felt comfortable. Weir noticed that many of the most helpful statements about faith came in answer to questions that did not explicitly mention faith—such as questions dealing with pressure, disappointments, winning, and losing. Such questions avoid ‘leading the witness’ and also help guard against the possibility that the interviewee will try to please the interviewer in the way they talk about matters of faith.<sup>8</sup>

Some interviews were conducted with a view to particular projects and have been published as part of such projects. Others fed into Weir’s other work in the field. On review for this paper, 38 of the interview transcripts yielded material clearly relevant to the question and eighteen athletes are quoted in this essay.

The evidence that we are using therefore has a somewhat accidental character to it. This has an advantage and a disadvantage. Negatively, the answers received were not intended directly to address our specific question or its sub-questions, and this means that we have been discerning a best fit among interview responses for our discussion; more positively, it also means that no participants were asked

<sup>7</sup> “At the Session Meeting on the 14 October 1936, approval was given for two new clubs—a Stamp Club and a Football Club, in both of which Mr. Barclay took an active part” (Humphrey 2000). For a Roman Catholic affirmation along similar lines see Pius XII from 1945, “Sport, properly directed, develops character, makes a man courageous, a generous loser, and a gracious victor; it refines the senses, gives intellectual penetration, and steels the will to endurance. It is not merely a physical development then. Sport, rightly understood, is an occupation of the whole man [sic], and while perfecting the body as an instrument of the mind, it also makes the mind itself a more refined instrument for the search and communication of truth and helps man to achieve that end to which all others must be subservient, the service and praise of his Creator.” (Pius 1945b, pp. 129–30).

<sup>8</sup> Examples of these open questions include: Is God involved in your sports life? Is God interested in sport? What is your motivation? How do you deal with disappointments and how does faith help? How does being a Christian affect your approach to athletics? Among questions asked in follow up to particular questions were: What does doing it for God mean? It is obvious listening to you that you see God very much involved in your running . . . where is God in your race . . . are you aware of Him when you are running?

leading questions, and all the responses have been offered without the respondents feeling under any obligation to make their responses fit the questions relating to worship.

### 3.2. *The Phenomenon of ‘Worshipful Sport:’ Gestures and Dispositions*

Scholars working in sport and theology, and indeed in the sociology of sport, have often remarked upon the quasi-liturgical aspects of sporting occasions (Bain-Selbo 2009, pp. 53–68; Higgs and Braswell 2004, pp. 153–78; Price 1992; Price 2001). Often in mind here are the repetitive and ritualistic dimensions of sport and the chanting of the crowd. We noted earlier a number of features of the phenomenon of worship and each of those aspects of worship has an analog in sport: repetitive social behavior, with strong social dimensions, are reported by elite sports participants who are acutely aware of the sporting calendar—dominated by major championships—and prepare and compete as part of a social group showing connections with supporters too. The sporting calendar may be compared with the church’s liturgical year in the way it gives a structure and rhythm to events. For the church, within the large arc of the liturgical year, there are also many repeated smaller patterns and rituals, and within each separate event throughout the sporting calendar there are also repeated elements with aspects of ritual to them and, especially given the ‘devotion’ with which they are performed, the comparison to worship seems uncontroversial. However, our interest here is primarily in the dispositions of athletes of faith.

We begin by noting that it is not uncommon to see sports stars performing apparently religious gestures. The sincerity or validity of such performances can be too easily discounted: who is to say what interior meaning such gestures have to each athlete, and what degree of sincerity or piety is involved in making them? Yet we also might suppose that worshipping God in and through sport involves more than crossing oneself on the pitch or kneeling and pointing to the sky after scoring a goal or a touchdown. We considered earlier that worship has a formative effect upon worshippers, so we would expect all true worship through sports participation to have an ethical dimension, and not be a matter of habitual or superstitious practices. We worship God not simply by praying as we begin to play but in the way in which we treat our colleagues and opponents, officials, and spectators—and in the relationship, we have to the rules and the spirit of our game. Believing that our competing is worship will also include a sense that our very playing is a kind of praise, a giving of glory to God; it will be an exuberant celebration of our embodiedness and a recognition that as creatures of God we are stretching and straining ourselves to accomplish that for which we were made—and giving pleasure to God in so doing (Ellis 2014, pp. 233–48). In his address to Roman athletes, Pius XII applied St. Paul’s exhortation, “Whether you eat or drink, whatever it is that you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31) to all physical and sporting activity (Pius 1945a).

In this light, we might understand Brazilian footballer and former World player of the year, Kakà’s explanation of prayers offered by Brazilian footballers after winning the 2002 FIFA World Cup Final. He says:

“We had already prayed before the game and at the end, we made that big circle. Normally we would have prayed in the changing room but this time we did it on the field instead. It was a prayer of thanksgiving, with the coaches and everyone . . . And then you also have the individual prayers. And at one point Lucio, Edmilson, and I were praying together. That was also a prayer of thanksgiving, for the opportunity that we had of winning the World Cup. That was a unique moment” (Weir 2014).

As well as various ritualistic acts performed by individuals, sports events, as a whole, offer evidence of repeated and regular ‘rites.’ Jeremy Treat invites us to imagine a new religion where a golden image (a championship trophy) is worshipped, and where worshippers gather regularly at the sanctuary (stadium), take up an offering (tickets), and worship with great passion (supporters). These ‘worshippers’ make sacrifices of time, money, even relationships, and a ‘priestly’ coach presides over the action. There is a series of rituals in preparation, some local and some near-universal,

from team huddles to singing, and all around are signs and symbols of ‘the saints of old’ (former players and their triumphs). These events, like other religions, have their programs of discipleship and processes of imitation (wearing team jerseys) (Treat 2015, p. 400; Treat 2018, p. 36).

A further point relates to our earlier observation regarding the roles of those who function as leaders, priests, etc. The role played by sports competitors appears to trigger or enable a response in others attending (spectators) which allows them to feel similar affective responses. It has elsewhere been argued that this might be described as “vicarious sport” (Ellis 2014, pp. 248–61), and it is the ‘priestly’ role of the athletes to facilitate this vicarious participation: the ‘worshipful sport’ of athletes enables that of others.

### 3.3. *Sporting Worship as the Offering of the Whole Self*

Our discussion of worship concluded with the affirmation that true worship involves an offering of our whole embodied selves and that while this may describe what happens in a worship service in church, it can and should also describe the Christian experience of work, play, and all of life. This offering of the whole self in a worshipful act through playing sport is reflected by elite athletes.

For John B. White, this is what one would expect if one adopts a sacramental view of creation. He refers to David Brown who suggests that in the incarnation, God “generously endorses materiality,” so that we should revalue all embodied activity including sport, and see its “intrinsic religious meaning” (White 2018, p. 102). For White, the incarnation implies that bodies in sport are divinely graced along with all bodies, and as such are able to mediate God’s presence and blessing. Echoing Christopher Ellis, he insists that we misunderstand worship when we see it as unrelated to “quodidian pursuits.” Instead, “offering praise to God is central to the divine project from creation to redemption, something that sportspersons can voice in and through their bodies” (White 2018, p. 104) as they compete. In fact, a sacramental world-view suggests we cannot avoid worshipping through what White calls “embodied liturgical activities like sport” (White 2018, p. 105). This, he remarks, might explain why humans are drawn to sport so strongly.

Three examples make the case well. Cat Reddick Whitehill, retired US soccer international, says “Many people think church is the only place to worship God. But you can worship God no matter what you’re doing. A soccer field is one of my favorite places to worship. Before the national anthem, I pray my performance will bring glory to God. Then the field becomes my church and playing to the best of my ability, a form of praise” (Whitehill 2012). Similarly, South African swimming Olympic gold medalist Penny Heyns says “I sensed God was saying to me, ‘As you swim up and down this black line, this is your opportunity to worship me. Every single breaststroke kick and pull that you do is the same as raising your hands in church and praising me. I’ll teach you to worship me through your talent.’” (Davies 2008, pp. 70–72; Heyns and Lemke 2004, pp. 96, 107–9, 129). Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce, twice Olympic champion at 100m, expresses a similar sentiment: “When I run, the first thing I say is: ‘I hope you are pleased with my worship’ for running is my worship—my way of worshipping him because he has given me the talents” (Weir 2011–2018). These kinds of self-understandings are entirely congruent with Christopher Ellis’ notion of worship as the offering of “our lives at work and play”, and Barclay’s claim that “real worship is something which sees the whole world as the temple of the living God, and every common deed an act of worship”.

### 3.4. *Sporting Worship as Dialogue with God*

An important aspect of historic understandings of worship was as a dialogue with God, and a number of athletes speak of a dialogue with God or Jesus as they compete. In a sense this is not surprising: it is a normal aspect of evangelical piety for the believer to have a sense of interaction with their Lord during moments of great significance. However, Christian elite athletes often connect this to an understanding of their sporting activity as an act of worship and self-offering. They often speak of a dialogue with God *while* they play and *about* their play. Thus, Eyong Enoh can say “I am constantly conscious of his presence and his voice wherever I am... on the pitch playing football, I am aware of his

presence . . . I constantly worship him everywhere I am. Anything I am doing” (Weir 2014). Similarly high-jumper Blanka Vlašić observes that “Well, [Jesus is] with me all the time. He is part of me. I talk to him because I know he is my best friend . . . I find it easy to talk to him. Often the conversations cannot be heard but I talk to him and confide in him . . . When I am jumping, I am not praying to win, I’m just praying to be able to give what I have at that moment . . . I pray, I tell him, Jesus I give you my feet. I give you my body. Everything I do today I want people to know that it is you and not me. After every jump, even if it is bad for the most important thing is to give glory to the one who made everything—not just jumping but you being there” (Weir 2011–2018).

Just as Christian worship is a response to what God has done and is doing, for many athletes of faith participation in sport is their response to the call of God, though sometimes this is implied in a sense of the gifting of God in order to compete. Irish World Lightweight boxing champion Katie Taylor believes that she entered the ring in response to God’s call. “I just feel that this is exactly what [God] wants me to do, and I just want to honour him in everything I do and live a really great life for him . . . I think boxing is what I was born to do. Everyone has gifts and talents, and that’s what God wants you to do” (O’Toole 2012, p. 15). Elsewhere she says, defending boxing against possible Christian complaint, that “I believe that it is God who has given me this talent for boxing. I believe this is a gift and that it is my God-given destiny to be a boxer. For me, that is absolutely clear. I’m privileged to glorify His name through my boxing” (Taylor 2012, p. 154).

For some athletes, this sense of sport as the response to a divine call is tied to the athletes’ understanding of the element of witness in their performance. Dawn Harper Nelson explains her habit of pointing to the sky from her running blocks as follows: “since high school that’s what I’ve always done. I do a kiss on my hand and a point up to God because he is the reason I am running and he’s given me my talent. And is to remember, good or bad, that I have been blest to be here and had not taken his name in vain. You can’t stand there and say ‘everyone, I believe in God, he’s been so good.’ So that’s my way of saying it and hopefully, someone sees that and thinks, ‘okay let me look into that. Let me see what that’s about’” (Weir 2011–2018).

### 3.5. *Sporting Worship and Rehearsing Christian Living*

Christopher Ellis also proposed that worship be understood as a kind of classroom experiment where we ‘try-out’ and practice what it means to be forgiving, to live thankfully, to give ourselves completely to God. There is some evidence that worshipping-in-sport also provides a means to practice (in the sense of rehearsing, improving) Christian living. Penny Heyns says, “swimming has in some ways been my ‘classroom’ where God teaches me so much about his ability and [to have] faith in him. I love the sense of satisfaction that I get when I’ve done a swimming workout or race, and know that I gave my whole being and heart to God in every moment of the swim. It’s the best worship I can offer him” (Weir 2004, p 138). British Olympic kayaker Angela Hannah speaks about how in sport she is “trying to be more like Jesus” (Weir 2011–2018), an expression suggesting an element of practicing. She admits that “I have definitely found it challenging to think of other people’s interests” in a situation where you are competing with team-mates for a place in a boat. This often-overlooked sense of competition in sport—against one’s own side, so to speak—requires the Christian athlete to cultivate competitiveness that is ‘other-regarding’ and Hannah’s sense of the challenge in this conveys the impression of a work in progress.

The formational worship of sport will affect not only the way athletes play but also the way they deal with setbacks. Felix Sanchez (Olympic and World Championship double gold medalist in the 400m hurdles), observes that “you see a lot of athletes say how blessed they are when they win and you don’t hear it so much when they lose” (Weir 2011–2018). Losing in a good spirit can be learned through respecting opponents—though few successful athletes will want to ‘learn to lose’ or be indifferent to defeat. Some speak of the need to move on through failure to grace (in words that sound like penitential liturgy) (Smith 2017, p. 67), or of using defeat as a form of witness to gracefulness. For instance, world swimming silver medalist Kirsty Balfour remarked after a poor performance in the

2008 Olympics, “Sometimes when it goes badly, God gets more glory in your reaction and in how you handle it—than in winning a medal” (Weir 2012, pp. 30–31).

### 3.6. Sporting Worship—Enjoying God and Giving God Glory

We have argued that we worship God in all things, not just in liturgical settings and that this is often expressed in terms of giving glory to God. We recall Pius XII’s application of 1 Cor 1:31 to all physical activity including sport. The notion of worship as giving glory to God is close to the heart of what many elite athletes of faith believe about their sporting lives, and it is common for Christians in elite sports to make an affirmation of this. It typically begins with a recognition that their athletic prowess is a divine gift. Jamaican sprinter Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce reports that “my talent is a gift from Him” (Weir 2011–2018); the American shot putter Michelle Carter affirms “God has given me this ability” (Weir 2011–2018); Kakà says, “my football ability is a gift from God” (Weir 2014); Boxer Katie Taylor explains, “I believe that it is God who has given me this talent for boxing” (Taylor 2012, p. 154).

Perhaps the mirror of this ‘enjoying God’ through worship is the idea that God ‘enjoys us’. This is suggested by the imaginative leap of scriptwriter Colin Welland in the movie *Chariots of Fire*,<sup>9</sup> which reflects the actual experience of many athletes. For instance, Katie Taylor remarks that “I think [using my talent in good performance] puts a big smile on God’s face when you’re doing what you were born to do” (O’Toole 2012, p. 15). Annie Blazer reports that she often heard people refer to the words Welland placed in the mouth of Liddell as “evidence that athletes can feel God’s pleasure during their athletic endeavors” (Blazer 2015, p. 55). Blazer’s book suggests that the idea of worshipping God through sport is widely held among American female evangelical athletes. This is confirmed in a UK context by the Christians in Sport *Ultimate Worship* interviews (Christians in Sport 2014). To this, we can add Allyson Felix, 2012 Olympic champion, triple World champion: “I definitely feel God’s pleasure when I run. And I feel like this is . . . the gift that he has given me to use for his glory” (Weir 2008). This affirmation is given added theological weight by Barreto who claims that we should see in sport “a God who creates and relishes the potential of our bodies and what we might do together to create something and thus reflect God’s own act of creation” (Barreto 2015, p. 375). White argues that God delights in us, and this delight means that God “celebrates the joys and loves integral to creaturely play . . . God not only created a world in which the whole of creation is to redound to his glory but also humans at play cause God’s delight and exultation” (White 2018, p. 109; Gorringer 2001).

Locating the heart of worship in giving God glory is an important perspective shared across Protestant and Catholic traditions. The Hebrew term translated ‘glory’ in the Old Testament, *kabod*, and its related New Testament term (Gen 31:1; Isa. 6:3, 8:7; Ps 50:2; Ezek. 10:18–19, 43:1–5; Luke 2:9; John 1:14; Eph. 1:17; Heb 1:3; Rev. 14:7), comes from the root meaning ‘heavy.’ It suggests splendor (glory is often thought to shine), riches, a pre-eminent position, power. Especially in its Greek translation in the Septuagint and the New Testament, the word *doxa* takes on overtones of reputation (Harrison 1984, pp. 443–44). An additional element particularly clear in the Old Testament is that of presence (Brueggemann 2002, pp. 87–89). To glorify God is, then to affirm God’s splendor, God’s “shining” pre-eminence and power; it is to acknowledge God’s presence with awe. In Christian liturgy this has often been focused on the doxologies—the term means “words of glory”—and hymnody performs this function in a less stylized way in other traditions.

For an athlete, to glorify God in their sport is to be understood in precisely these ways. Not through prayer or song, but through running or aiming or striking a ball—and through their demeanor in play, and in the aftermath of the contest. Some examples will demonstrate how this fits the self-understanding of elite athletes, and also bring some interesting questions to the fore. Steph Cook, Olympic champion

<sup>9</sup> In (*Chariots of Fire* 1981), the 1924 Olympic 400 m Gold medalist Eric Liddell, says “I believe God made me for a purpose—for China—but he also made me fast and when I run I feel his pleasure and to give it up would be to hold him in contempt. To win is to honor him.” Written by script writer, Colin Welland, the line was not spoken by Liddell but is nonetheless often regarded as an authentic expression of his sentiment. Letter from Welland to Weir, December 2002.

in 2000, offers a straightforward piece of evidence. “When I took up modern pentathlon,” she says, “it was obvious that God had given me gifts for the sport. I just tried to use the ability God had given me to the full, and hopefully, bring some glory to his name in the process” (Weir 2004, p. 79). Here the athlete appears to be suggesting that they are acknowledging the source of their athletic prowess—despite the many hours in which this is refined and improved—in God’s gift and that in some sense their achievement points away from themselves to the giver of the gift, God. Her acknowledgment of the source of her athletic gifts adds luster to God’s repute and adds ‘weight’ to God’s splendor and claim on our lives.

Former Italian international footballer Nicola Legrottaglie, now a coach in the sport, claims that “everything I do must be done to proclaim the name of Jesus, to give Him glory” (Weir 2010). British international rugby league player Jamie Jones-Buchanan speaks of “doing it all for God’s glory in his service” (Weir 2011–2018). Similarly, Kenyan World Champion marathon runner, Catherine Ndereba, is clear about the source and purpose of her talent: “[God] gives me the talent . . . And I can use it for His glory” (Weir 2008). What remains a little unclear, perhaps, to the casual observer is how and to whom the glory of God is proclaimed through such success. Is it mainly to an inner circle ‘in the know’? Or is it possible to make this glory known in a more popular way? Athletes here walk a difficult line between putting the general public off, and even breaking the rules of their sport, and finding ways in which to point beyond themselves to the One they understand to be the giver of their gifts. This is where some of those visible gestures might be considered—at least some of the time—as visual cues to interior dispositions: no wonder, for many, it is the simple finger to the sky or the brief moment of kneeling beyond the finish line.

This pointing beyond oneself is not straightforward—especially when the small acts of piety just mentioned may seem to some to be affectations, or to be themselves a kind of drawing attention to oneself rather than God. American Olympic hurdler Kellie Wells affirms that “I do it all for him,” and then goes on to point out the temptation to take the glory *herself*. Giving glory to God is a challenge: “If I do it for myself that is for selfish reasons. Trying to glorify myself is definitely a huge sin. God gave me this talent. He put me on this earth. He knew my path before I did. So if I don’t thank him and exalt him in all I do, it is a waste” (Weir 2011–2018).

Through all this, there is also the difficult question of how important it is to gain glory—for oneself or for God—through winning. The Christian gospel is a gospel of final victory, but it is also one marked by suffering, setback, and a patient waiting for the revealing of God’s glory. This conundrum is nicely captured by former quarterback Roger Staubach. He observes that “I had promised that it would be for God’s honor and glory, whether we won or lost. Of course, the glory was better for God and me since we won, because the victory gave me a greater platform from which to speak” (Hoffman 1986, p. 20). Commenting on Staubach’s similar contribution to Jamie Buckingham’s book *Power for Living* (Buckingham 1985, p. 1), Robert Higgs notes how uncomfortably human success (especially with a concomitant worldly wealth) sits with Scriptural attitudes to fame and money: “the convenience with which the things of Caesar are reconciled with the things of God is amazing” (Higgs 1995, p. 297). Is God glorified by the success of an athlete, or by some other aspect of their performance? Brian Smith’s advice to athletes to glorify God in defeat suggests something more complex than a straightforward link between victory and glorification: that the attitude of performance, for instance, might be as important (Smith 2017, p. 64).

### 3.7. Sporting Worship as Attentiveness to God

Christopher Ellis’ other observation about worship is that in directing our attention in quite specific and distinctive ways to God (through preaching and the sacraments, for instance), the worshipper is more able to attend to God in other contexts. It will be recalled that Ellis argued that worship was not an escape from everyday life, but a way of becoming more aware of God in it. This was in part through the offering of our embodied selves to God in worship—not our disembodied selves supposedly refined spiritual selves worshipping in church, but the offering of our whole selves in

relationship to God (“our lives at work and play”) and our whole lives in the world (Ellis 2009, p. 32). For the sportsperson, the idea of offering one’s body as a living sacrifice has extra meaning. Sport is an embodied activity. To be asked to offer that *sporting body* as a living sacrifice means playing as those who have given their bodies to Jesus Christ, offering them as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—a spiritual act of worship. Peter Brock, a former New England Patriots player, referred to Rom 12 in stating that playing his sport was an act of worship in words that again recall the memorable line in *Chariots of Fire*: “I now approach Sunday afternoons as a worship service. The Bible tells me ‘present your body as a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service or worship.’ God has blessed me with a large body and great strength and the ability to play this difficult game” (Weir 1993, pp. 187–88). World champion 400 m hurdler Kori Carter sees in her running a reflective opportunity to deepen her relationship with and awareness of God that appears to exceed even her experience in church (Weir 2011–2018). She remarks that the “time for reflection” which running gives has enabled a deeper relationship with God, and allowed her to put “things in perspective”.

### 3.8. *Sporting Worship and Special Places*

While believers may offer worship through everyday activities at all times, it is also the case that corporate worship is focused on particular days and in particular places—these places often become important to worshippers because of a build-up of significant memories, the relationships which are nourished there, and because familiar topography and cues facilitate their worship and experience of God. Sometimes, as with organized pilgrimage events or in the more informal relationships which believers might have to (for instance) a Cathedral or other especially significant venue, there are locations that become special even though visits there may be infrequent or constitute a special occasion. In similar ways, recreational athletes may develop a particular connection with their own home playing venue, and also occasionally enjoy the opportunity to compete at a more professional venue. For elite athletes, it is likely to be the sporting venues and the competitions which are international in nature which are sought after and memorable. As worship can be quickened in a special religious site, so sporting performance can be enhanced in the big occasion in a special place, and for athletes of faith, this can also lead to a deepening of the spiritual experience they report.

In the relation of sports competitors and supporters to major sporting venues—such as Olympic stadia—we see something of the significance of special places that appears similar to those in worship. Examples are legion, and we might initially refer to some examples from football—which does, it is true, sometimes appear to generate a particularly ‘religious’ fervor: at Old Trafford, a banner reads “Man U The Religion”; Hibernian’s Easter Road ground is nicknamed “The Holy Ground” (Football Stadiums 2015–2020); fans regularly buy turf from stadia when the surface is re-laid.

Liverpool’s “This is Anfield” sign, under which players pass on their way to the pitch, reminds us that players too can have a strong sense of place. For a Scottish athlete, given the distinctive contours of Scottish identity, competing in Scotland surpasses even the London Olympics. Scottish 400m hurdler Eilidh Doyle described the experience of competing at the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow, 2014: “Glasgow was just incredible. My big highlight was the lap of honor. Not so much winning the silver medal. While winning the European was a bigger achievement than the Glasgow silver medal, Glasgow was a better experience—the lap of honor, the stadium, and the atmosphere were just incredible and something I don’t think I’ll ever experience again. The London Olympics was just as big but for Scottish athletes, Glasgow was extra special” (Weir 2011–2018).

Such reports also shed light upon the complex relationship between athletes and supporters, which we have already likened to that between celebrant and congregation. Doyle’s report indicates how crowd support may intensify the athlete’s experience.

### 3.9. *Sporting Worship and Divine Communion*

The sense of worship as attaining unity with God is perhaps more commonly understood, certainly in Protestant circles, as divine communion. This can be evident from Roger Bannister’s description of

his joy at running on the beach, although he does not offer it as a religious description, may be helpful. He says that “the earth seemed almost to move with me. I was running now, and a fresh rhythm entered my body. No longer conscious of my movement I discovered a new unity with nature. I had found a source of power and beauty, a source I never dreamt existed” (Bannister 2004, p. 1; see also Hochstetler 2019; Kelly 2019; Joslin 2003; Higdon 1992). There is a good deal in common here with the flow experience described by Hungarian-American psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi which has been extremely influential in the discussion of sporting experience as religious experience—particularly considering the apparent similarity of flow experiences and mystical experience—which has divine communion as a core element.

We have heard that Kori Carter found an opportunity for a spiritual experience in her running. Hochstetler echoes this, reflecting on his experience as a runner, in words not so far from Bannister’s: “The very act of running, typically outdoors and away from our concerns of work and ‘normal’ life, provides the opportunity to enter God’s presence . . . While running, it is possible to sense God’s presence through a sunrise, the natural surroundings of a trail run or run through farmland, or through this reflective stance come to realize a sense of gratitude or humility” (Hochstetler 2019, pp. 143–44).

Elite athletes testify to their sense of divine communion in various ways, including by the close sense of divine presence which is often a mark of descriptions of their experience. Sports ministry practitioner Wes Neal reports that he encouraged athletes to see themselves as in union with Jesus, and this experience could give Christian athletes a distinctive experience in performance (Neal 1981, p. 20; Blazer 2015, p. 63, observes that these accounts seem very similar to those offered by some secular athletes, but we are concerned here with the self-understanding of athletes of faith).

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

We do not find every aspect of worship noted earlier in an initial overview of the subject in the testimony of elite athletes of faith and our reflection upon it, though some of those missing elements we may find elsewhere in the experience of recreational players and in a more theoretical account of the issues. However, this paper is concerned with a particular voice, with the perspective of an important group in modern sport experience—the elite athletes—and while we are anxious to claim as much as the evidence appears to allow, neither do we want to overstate our case. It does appear, however, that there are very good grounds for affirming that the experience and self-understanding of many elite athletes of faith in their playing and competing in sport can indeed be properly understood as a form of worship and that this experience and self-understanding corresponds to typical Christian concepts of worship.

It may be helpful to qualify and elaborate on this statement in a number of ways. Firstly, it needs to be emphasized that we have in mind here specifically the worship of the elite athletes’ performance; we are not speaking of the ‘vicarious sporting’ experience of spectators. Any examination of spectators’ experience as worship and claims about the extent to which it may be regarded (or not) as genuinely ‘religious’ are beside our point here. Furthermore, there is a real difference between such affirmations. Should it be considered that spectators’ (quasi-) ‘religious experience’ *is* genuinely religious in nature, then it would typically be regarded as such in what might be called an unconscious form, i.e., such ‘worship’ would be offered in such a way that those offering it are not aware of what they are doing, or at least not precisely aware. The elite athletes whose self-understanding we have considered here, however, are consciously and—more—intentionally engaged in the worship of a God whose name they know and to whom they seek to bring renown through their sport.

In describing the methodology used in assembling the data for this study, we indicated that our evidence had been obtained while asking more general questions. We argued that this had both advantages and disadvantages. One disadvantage we note now is the lack of reflexivity on our question among athletes, which more intentionality in interviews might have addressed. The athletes were not probed on such questions as to how vainglory or exhibitionism, lack of form, poor performance, defeat, and rule-breaking, might affect the sense in which their performance constitutes worship. At first sight,

each of these phenomena, with the possible exception of rule-breaking of a deliberate kind, will be experienced by all elite players. This may be regarded by some as undermining the ‘worshipfulness’ of performance in different ways. This issue, along with more intentional questions generally, presents as a possible focus for future research. However, it should also be understood that the ‘worship’ offered in traditional sites of religious worship is not immune to such problems. Those officiating at or participating in services of worship also have flaws of character, good days and bad days, and in the latter case, the expression and experience of worship can be sub-optimal. Sometimes elements of worship may be distorted or omitted, or the ‘rules broken’ in some other way. However, no such problems of themselves invalidate the worship entirely, nor are they believed to prevent the presence and activity of God. The ancient phrase *ex opera operato* suggests something similar.

The seventeenth-century protestant reformers who wrote the Westminster Confession, suggested that the prime purpose of the human person is to give glory to God, and this is a central—perhaps the central—aim of Christian worship. It also emerges in our study as a key part of the way in which elite athletes understand their sporting performance as worship. This was a dominant and recurrent theme in the interviews with Weir, as was the sense that athletic prowess itself was a divine gift. This allows us to suggest that many elite athletes of faith see their sporting performance as an offering of a divine talent back to its source in order to glorify God. This fits well with our understanding of worship, not least in seeing it as a means by which the worshipper offers themselves to God. “Truly spiritual” worship, we noted, will be connected to our ordinary existence rather than separated from it. Worship, in which we offer our whole lives to God, *prepares* us for our quotidian lives; and those lives, in turn, *become worship* in a virtuous circle demonstrated by the evidence from our elite athletes.

This sense of sporting performance as worship also appears to derive from and give credence to a belief in the divine endorsement of our material or embodied existence. In the worship of sporting performance, elite athletes offer their embodied selves back to God for God’s glory. This, in turn, allowed us to imagine a reversal of the Westminster Confession’s famous dictum: that God (in Barreto’s words) might create and also “relish” the potential of our bodies.

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