

Religion & Sports Resources from Panelists

[YouTube link](#) – released March 2024

These resources have been gathered from the panelists and are intended to be used for others to learn and teach from.

Jeffrey Scholes is a Professor of Religious Studies in the Department of Philosophy and the Director of the Center for Religious Diversity and Public Life at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs. His research interests center on the relationship between religion and sports and American political theology. He is the author of *Vocation and the Politics of Work: Popular Theology in a Consumer Culture* (Lexington 2013), *Religion and Sports in American Culture* (Routledge 2014), *Christianity, Race, and Sport* (Routledge, 2021), and co-editor with Randall Balmer of *Religion and Sport in North America: Critical Essays for the Twenty-First Century* (Routledge, 2022). He is currently working on a book on Religion and Sports Fandom.

Syllabi

[Religion and Sports Syllabus](#)

[Religion and The Spirit of Capitalism Syllabus](#)

Books

[Vocation and the Politics of Work: Popular Theology in a Consumer Culture](#)

- This book surveys the theological and cultural appropriations of the Protestant concept of vocation to argue for a vocation that has political traction in modern workplaces. It uniquely brings together insights from recent works in political theology and consumer culture studies along with analyses of self-help literature to accomplish this task.

[Religion and Sports in American Culture](#)

- *Religion and Sports in American Culture* explores the relationship between religion and modern sports in America. Whether found in the religious purpose of ancient Olympic Games, in curses believed to plague the Chicago Cubs, or in the figure of Tim Tebow, religion and sports have been and are still tightly intertwined. While there is widespread suspicion that sports are slowly encroaching on the territory historically occupied by religion, Scholes and Sassower assert that sports are not replacing religion and that neither are sports a religion. Instead, the authors look at the relationship between sports and religion in America from a post-secular perspective that looks at both discourses as a part of the same cultural web. In this way, each institution can maintain its own integrity, legitimacy, and unique expression of cultural values as they relate to each other. Utilizing important themes that intersect both religion and sports, Scholes and Sassower illuminate the complex and often publicly contentious relationship between the two.

[Christianity, Race, and Sport](#)

- This text examines how Protestant Christianity and race have interacted, often to the detriment of Black bodies, throughout the sporting world over the last century. Important sporting figures and case studies discussed include: the sanctification of Jackie Robinson; the domestication of Muhammad Ali and George Foreman; treatment of African American tennis player Serena Williams; Colin Kaepernick and his prophetic voice and more.

Fun Fact: He is currently working on a book on Religion and Sports Fandom.

Annie Blazer is an Associate Professor of Religious Studies at the College of William and Mary. Her courses cover religion in America from the colonial to contemporary period. In particular, Professor Blazer's courses investigate the relationships between religions and American culture, paying attention to race, class, gender, and sexuality. Professor Blazer's first book, *Playing for God: Evangelical Women and the Unintended Consequences of Sports Ministry* (NYU Press), was released in July 2015. The book is an ethnographic exploration of the religious experiences of Christian athletes in the U.S. Professor Blazer's current research project investigates the effects of gentrification and re-urbanization on religious communities and focuses on the East End of Richmond, Virginia.

Book

[Playing for God: Evangelical Women and the Unintended Consequences of Sports Ministry](#)

- "In *Playing for God*, Annie Blazer offers an exploration of the history and religious lives of Christian athletes, showing that evangelical engagement with popular culture can carry unintended consequences. When sport became an avenue for embodied worship, it forced a reckoning with evangelical teachings about the body. Female Christian athletes increasingly turned to their own bodies to understand their religious identity, and in so doing, came to question evangelical mainstays on gender and sexuality. What was once a male-dominated masculinist project of sports engagement became a female-dominated movement that challenged evangelical ideas on femininity, marriage hierarchy, and the sinfulness of homosexuality. Though evangelicalism has not changed sporting culture, for those involved in sports ministry, sport has changed evangelicalism."

Articles

[When Rituals Fail: Confessions of Doping in Elite Sports](#)

- "In the nineteenth century, Protestant reformers declared: Sport builds character. They described sport as ethically valuable and as an experiential tool to teach values and cooperation. However, sports have long raised ethical challenges when it comes to fairness in competition. This article examines controversies over performance enhancing drugs and pays attention to the rituals of confession at play for those caught doping. ... Rituals of confession preserve an underlying ideology that sport is morally valuable. When these rituals fail, they reveal less noble structural motivations that lead to doping in the first place like monetary reward, intense pressure to perform, and the entertainment demands of elite sport."

[Gender Policing in Girls' and Women's Sports](#)

- “This paper will show that sporting institutions that police the boundaries of women’s sports do so to keep sportswomen constrained in ways that men’s sports and male athletes are not. This paper explores three methods that sporting establishments have used to police and constrain women’s sports and sportswomen: the exclusion of women and the creation of different rules for men’s and women’s sports, the policing of international sporting administrations of which women can compete in women’s sports by invoking the specter of “gender fraud”, and the exclusion of trans women from sports by relying on conservative Christian notions of a gender binary motivated by a similar strain of homophobia that animated previous efforts to prevent the legalization of same-sex marriage. Taken together, these three threads reveal that gender policing in women’s sports is not and has never been about “fairness” but about preserving heteropatriarchal systems of power that position women as weak and inherently less athletic than men.”

How Gentrification Can Contribute to Racial Reconciliation: A Case Study

Major Question: What are the positive and negative consequences of sporting participation for kids and adults? What do we want participation in sport to accomplish? Is sport currently accomplishing those things? Why or why not? If not, what would need to change to align today's sports with our values?

Fun Fact: Annie Blazer plays bass in a female-forward '90s cover band called Jojo and the Kick-its.

Sources Used in Teaching

- Steven Reiss, “Tough Jews: The Jewish American Boxing Experience, 1890-1950” in *Sports and the American Jew*,
- Julie Byrne, “Philadelphia Hoop and Catholic Fun” in *O God of Players: The Story of the Immaculata Mighty Macs*
- Eric Bain-Selbo, “Conclusion: Sport as Religion?” in *Game Day and God: Football, Faith, and Politics in the American South*, 213-239.
- Michael Barnett, *Changing the Game* (2019),
- Clifford Putney, “Fishers of Boys” in *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920*, 99-126
- Julie Byrne, “Bodies in Basketball” in *O God of Players: The Story of the Immaculata Mighty Macs*
- Jeremy Sabella, “Postures of Piety and Protest: American Civil Religion and the Politics of Kneeling in the NFL” *Religions* 2019

Onaje Woodbine is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Religion at American University. Dr. Woodbine's research explores the varieties of black religious experience, especially as they are lived on the margins of power and outside the bounds of established institutional authority. His most recent book, *Black Gods of the Asphalt: Religion, Hip-Hop, and Street Basketball*, garnered national praise as “a profound narrative of survival [and] self-determination ... in this season where black male bodies are under attack.” Covered by The New York Times (“street basketball functions as an outlet of mourning and healing of urban youths”), NPR's All Things Considered (“invites readers to look at basketball differently ... as a sacred space where young black boys go to ‘reclaim their humanity’”), ESPN (“full of colorful tales and haunting heartbreaks”), Boston Magazine (“painful, beautiful, nonfiction debut”), and the National Catholic Reporter (“A powerful and deeply moving work ... reveals a world of redemption and hope rarely glimpsed from the outside”), *Black Gods* was longlisted for the 2017 PEN/ESPN Award for Literary Sports Writing and named one of The Boston Globe's best books of 2016.

Book

[Black Gods of the Asphalt: Religion, Hip-Hop, and Street Basketball](#)

- “Through interviews with and observations of urban basketball players, Onaje X. O. Woodbine composes a rare portrait of a passionate, committed, and resilient group of athletes who use the court to mine what urban life cannot corrupt. If people turn to religion to reimagine their place in the world, then black streetball players are indeed the hierophants of the asphalt.”

Article

[White Hauntings, Black Hoops: The Ghosts of Kyrie Irving](#)

- “For the casual observer, Irving's pre-game ritual and later decision not to play may have seemed weird or even pretentious for an NBA millionaire. But within the larger context of white supremacy, athletes of color have been transforming themselves into choreographers of the basketball court for decades, playing the game in order to express grief, to generate hope, and to resist the harmful effects of racism in American sports and American society.”

[Of Hoops and Healing](#)

Major question: How does grief shape sport as a spiritual/religious practice?

Fun fact: He was a consultant for the Steven Soderbergh film *High Flying Bird*

- [Trailer for movie](#)

Sources used in teaching

“This is a great animation that I often use to explore themes of spirit possession in sport.”

- <https://vimeo.com/41730772>