Religion in the Life of Kobe Bryant

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Abstract

Kobe Bryant was a practicing Catholic who emphasized the importance of faith in a myriad of ways. This article shows how religion had a transformative impact on his life, including the influence of Catholic social teachings on Bryant's outlook and motivation during and after his playing days.

Keywords American sport · Basketball · Kobe Bryant · Religion · Prayer

Introduction

Sport and religion are separate spheres, seemingly having little in common, arguably as separate as church and state. Yet below the surface reveals an interesting and important overlap. Sports and religion do, indeed, have a long history of mutual interplay (Alpert, 2015, 24). In fact, the relationship between the two is a multifaceted phenomenon existing since the advent of sporting rivalry. As William J. Baker puts it, “from the earliest glimmer of civilization to the most recent World Cup, religion and sport have been intimately connected. ... As religion and sport have interacted vigorously throughout history, the terms of their relationship have changed over time, but never has the one been far removed from the other” (Baker, 2012, 216). In other words, these connections constitute not only an important segment of the history of sport but continue to function currently in different modified forms.

The observations of Parker and Watson (2013, 9–10) show how that interaction took shape in particular periods of time:

Historians and anthropologists have mapped a relationship between religion and sport that spans approximately three thousand years ... Links between the sacred and sport have been identified in a number of historical epochs. These include primitive times when ritual-cultic ball games were played to appease the gods (for fertility); the athletic spectacles of ancient Greece and the Olym-

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pic games that were held in honor of mythological deities; the gladiatorial contests of Rome; the festivals and folk-games of the Middle Ages; the general Puritan suspicion and prohibitions against sports; and, lastly, Victorian muscular Christianity (1850–1910), a socio-theological movement, and some would argue ideology, that significantly shaped the character of modern sports.

The phenomenon seems to have no borders, which makes it something ubiquitous. As Andrew R. Meyer et al. (Meyer et al., 2017, 632) note, “sport and religion share a long history of social significance, transcending culture and geographic location.” Although over the centuries, secularization permeated sport, different kinds of connections between these two important spheres of life remain (Mazurkiewicz, 2018a, b). Religion constitutes a part of the world of sport and vice versa.

Although the intricate interplay of religion with all kinds of social, political, or economic forces has been a frequently explored research field among historians, sociologists, and religion scholars, it should be noted that the relationship between religion and sport (until the last few decades of the twentieth century) has not received the scholarly attention it deserves. Despite the long-existing general neglect of sport as a topic of scholarly inquiry by those in traditional disciplines (Hoffman, 1992, vii), the field of study known as religion and sports has only been around since the 1970s (Mazurkiewicz, 2018a, 109). In the following years, there was considerable growth in the academic literature focusing on the subject of sport and religion. Consequently, new areas of investigation started growing in importance (Parker & Watson, 2013, 1). Houlberg et al. (2017, 29) elucidate:

The visibility of religion in sports has sparked countless magazines articles, newspaper columns, books, and documentaries that have differing views on the utility of faith within sports. Recently, there has been increased scholarly attention on the interface of sports and Christianity due in part to organizations like Christian Society for Kinesiology, Leisure and Sport Studies (CSKLS) and the recent gathering of international researchers and professionals at the Inaugural Global Conference on Sports and Christianity (IGCSC).

As American philosopher Novak (2013, xi) states, especially “sports requiring high skill and heroism have always generated electricity back and forth with religion, not only with Christianity.” Given its great intensity and drama, basketball can be regarded as such a sports discipline. Numerous athletes have emphasized that religion was their main source of motivation and an important success factor. The foremost aim of this paper is to examine the relationship between sport and religion by analyzing the life, activity, and legacy of Kobe Bryant, one of the game’s all-time greats.

Religious Athletes and the Manifestations of Religion in Sport

Sport in itself is not the sole focus of sports historians, some of whom have explored the subject of religion. Thinking about athletes whose lives were/or pervaded by religious ethics, Eric Liddell, the Scottish athlete who excelled in track and field,

is the first name that comes to mind. This Christian missionary saw religion as the highest priority, as he refused to run in the 100-m heats at the Olympic games in Paris in 1924 because the event was held on a Sunday. His story was featured in the Oscar-winning film *Chariots of Fire* (1981).

Former football (soccer) legends, such as Maradona and Pelé, frequently emphasized the importance of religion in the course of their careers. Maradona once stated: “God makes me play well. That is why I always make the sign of the cross when I walk out on to the pitch. I feel I would be betraying him if I didn’t do that.” (Burns, 1996, 83). As for Pelé, he remembered: I’ve always been religious. I come from a Catholic family, full of faith and always looking for God along my paths through life. (Pelé, 2006, 178).

As for public expressions of religious beliefs in contemporary sport, many footballers (soccer players) cross themselves before a match; moreover, attachment to religion is very often visible in the form of chains, medallions, or photos, treated with reverence (Mazurkiewicz, 2011, 324–326). It has also been demonstrated on the shirts of athletes. On David Alaba’s shirt, an Austrian player, one sees the message “My strength lies in Jesus” (“David Alaba: My strength...”, 2020). Uruguayan star Edinson Cavani has worn “I belong to Jesus” T-shirts under his jerseys and declared in an interview for *El País* that he is “an athlete for Christ” (Ackerman, 2018). He explained: “That’s why I play for Him, to give Him glory, to thank Him for giving me the ability to play football ... for giving me that divine gift that I am trying to manage more and more” (Ackerman, 2018).

Some Polish footballers, openly declaring attachment to their faith, both inside and outside the stadium, joined the action “I am Not Ashamed of Jesus,” an effort initiated in 2011 by the members of the Youth Crusade and that constitute an answer to—as they described it—aggressive attitudes of left-wing and lay milieus (“Nie wstydzę się...” n.d.). Famous stars, such as Robert Lewandowski, who plays striker for the Bundesliga club Bayern Munich and is captain of the Poland national team, supported the action publicly, encouraging others not to be ashamed of manifesting openly one’s faith (Mazurkiewicz, 2018b, 218–219).

Manifestations of such support also include public prayer, which has been a topic of discussion in many publications on sport and religion. Hoffman (2010, 240) pays attention to both individual and team practice of praying (in locker rooms, before and after games). As he remarks, “this trend of praying in sports has been on the rise for at least thirty years” (Hoffman, 2010, 240). In fact, “religion has become so commonplace that athletes on every level are routinely seen and encouraged to pray before and after an event, and many are even shown performing some aspect of prayer following touchdowns, homeruns, and post-celebratory victories” (Smith, 2017, 15–16). As for American sport, a good example is former professional American football player Tim Tebow, famous for kneeling in prayer after scoring a touchdown, which has since been referred to as “Tebowing.” As Novak (2013, xi) states, “what makes him so beloved to the public ... is that he always goes down on one knee, his head in his hands, and communes with God. Win or lose, he thanks God.” Importantly, the famous athlete has shared his Christian faith in prisons and schools, to church and youth groups, and at numerous meetings at conferences (Tebow & Gregory, 2017). But decades before Tebow, there were Reggie White,

former Green Bay Packer and Philadelphia Eagle Defensive End, and former New York Giant Linebacker Lawrence Taylor who were known to pray openly, on the field, with teammates as well as members of the opposing team. Sporting activities provide a popular stage upon which athletes can display their exceptional skills, experience the exhilaration and disappointment of competition, bask in adulation from adoring fans, and pursue fame and fortune.

Kobe Bryant and His Catholic Roots

Kobe Bryant was born in Philadelphia on August 23, 1978. He was raised in a Catholic family, and a good chunk of his childhood (from age 6 to 13) was spent living in Italy, as his father, Joe “Jelly-Bean” Bryant, a former NBA player, continued his career in that country. Because the family moved several times, due to Joe Bryant’s change in teams, the ability to adapt proved to be one of Kobe’s greatest strengths. Joe Bryant played seven seasons in Italy for four teams. The Bryant family first went to Rieti, a town in central Italy, approximately 50 miles from Rome, and then moved to Reggio Calabria, in the country’s toe, then to Cireglio in Tuscany, and finally to Reggio Emilia, in the north. During those formative years in Italy, Kobe immersed himself in Italy’s culture, which included becoming fluent in Italian.

Italy, a country known for its food, historic sights, and being home to some of the world’s best soccer teams is traditionally and overwhelmingly Catholic. The fact that the religious and social landscape of the country was strongly influenced by the Roman Catholic tradition played an important role in Bryant’s formative years. For example, his biographers note that his parents chose a Catholic education for their children: “Kobe and his sisters took ballet, and Shaya [his sister] discovered that she liked karate almost as much as her brother. The schools were Catholic, run by no-nonsense nuns, and the children received outstanding educations” (Lazenby, 2016, 86).

Interestingly, the predilection for basketball developed in close association with religion. It was the area around the local church in Rieti (Stigmatini di Rieti, nowadays Casa del Buon Pastore) where young Bryant learned the finer points of the game. Andrea Barocci, a sports journalist recalled in an interview: By “Aged 6, Kobe would often jump off the balcony of his parents’ house, cross a busy road and run to a church playground, where he would spend hours throwing a ball in the basket” (Lavanga, 2020). Giacomo Vittori, Kobe’s childhood friend from Italy, stated that even at that early stage “the mentality of Kobe was very concentrated to win, win, win” (Lazenby, 2016, 81).

The Bryant family felt very comfortable in Italy, drawing creative energy both from their surroundings as well as the local residents. Roland Lazenby, Kobe Bryant’s biographer, notes: “despite the genial people and laid-back atmosphere, there was passion everywhere, from Italy’s many Renaissance-era cathedrals and chapels to its basketball arenas, jammed with singing, dancing fans” (Lazenby, 2016, 84). Thus, the Bryants lived in Rieti, Reggio Calabria, Cireglio (Pistoia), and Reggio Emilia, the last place holding an especially important place in Kobe’s heart. Although Kobe left Italy for the states at the age of 13 (Gleeson, 2020), some still considered him a native son of

sorts (Lazenby, 2016, 82). One of Bryant's childhood friends in Italy, Alessia Pierattini, recalled a surprise visit to Rieti by the basketball superstar in 2013. "One morning at 7, the doorbell rang and I saw Kobe," During their conversations, when memories connected with religious practices, she showed him a photo album that she put together of pictures of when he was a boy including his First Holy Communion at a local Roman Catholic Church in Cireglio (Corvino & Amante, 2020). "When we left the house after an hour together, people stopped their cars because they wanted to see him. He was open to everybody and took photos in the streets (with them)," Pierattini remembered. She added that Kobe told her that he wanted to bring his daughter to live in Italy. "I want them to experience what I felt as a child, a reality that does not exist in America," Pierattini remembers Kobe telling her (Corvino & Amante, 2020).

Religiousness of Kobe Bryant

Steve James (James, 2020, 69) recalls an instance where Bryant confirmed the importance of religion in his life: "he expressed his faith in God outright, saying, 'I've pretty much done all I can here and, you know, God will carry me the rest of the way, so I'm pretty comfortable with that.'" However, as commentators notice, "Although Kobe was religious, he did not make religious statements quite as often as many other athletes" (James, 2020, 69). Why this is so is not entirely clear. The Catholic faith was a guiding light throughout his life. Yet it was only after his tragic death that it was revealed in detail, the extent to which he took religion seriously. Catholic News Agency (CNA) played an integral role in making people aware that Bryant was a devout Catholic. Soon, other catholic media outlets and forums followed suit, such as Breitbart and conservative Catholic media (Lisi, 2020). The most important reason for the relative invisibility of religion-related subjects in the mainstream media can be easily explained. Journalist Clemente Lisi, of *Religion Unplugged*, justifies the prior reluctance on the part of journalists venturing into that aspect of Bryant's life in the following way:

Repairing your marriage and finding redemption in God must be a right-wing thing if most of the news media finds it uninteresting to report on as part of the Kobe story and legacy. ... The mainstream news media has been squeamish to report on Bryant's faith. The reason may be two-fold. One, it would involve actually reporting on religion. The second, rehashing the rape allegation, an episode that is both dark and bleak from his past, is no way to remember Bryant's life. After all, who wants to speak ill of the dead (Lisi, 2020).

What the author refers to is the accusation of sexual assault in Colorado in 2003. Controversy swirled as Bryant claimed the sex was consensual. Although the charges against the athlete were eventually dropped as the woman refused to testify, the whole affair cast a shadow over him. As a result, "Kobe was very much under the spotlight during 2003–2004 as a result of the case" (James, 2020, 62). Without any doubt, this was a low point in both his personal and professional life (James, 2020,

64). That event, however, and its consequences set the stage for a personal transformation on Kobe's part. CNN religion commentator, Father Beck (2020), spoke to this point, eloquently:

Kobe said he was sorry and took moral responsibility for his behavior and the consequences of it. While some questioned the timing of his apology—made after case dismissal—many witnessed instead a self-professed sinner who had been humbled and had recognized his need for mercy and forgiveness. And thus the redemption of Kobe Bryant began—in the eyes of God, his Church, his family and many of his fans.

Bryant's firm resolution to start a new chapter in his life was greatly influenced by religion. In an interview with ESPN's Stephen A. Smith, in 2006, in response to the question about what he had learned from the incident in Colorado. Bryant replied: "God is great" (Lisi, 2020). Smith responded—"everyone knows that"—at which point Bryant went on to explain: "You can know it all you want, but until you have to pick up that cross that you can't carry and he picks it up for you and carries you and the cross, then you know" (Lisi, 2020). Kobe's response suggests a level of maturity and introspection. Nearly 10 years later in 2015, he "credited his Catholic faith with helping him move past a challenging period in his own life and the life of his family" ("The Catholic faith...", 2020). In an interview published in *GQ*, Bryant stated:

The one thing that really helped me during that process—I'm Catholic, I grew up Catholic, my kids are Catholic—was talking to a priest. It was actually kind of funny: He looks at me and says, "Did you do it?" And I say, "Of course not." Then he asks, "Do you have a good lawyer?" And I'm like, "Uh, yeah, he's phenomenal." So then he just said, "Let it go. Move on. God's not going to give you anything you can't handle, and it's in his hands now. This is something you can't control. So, let it go." And that was the turning point (Klosterman, 2015).

This is not to say that the redemption process was an easy one. In 2011, Kobe's marriage was on the rocks as his wife filed for divorce. The divorce petition was eventually withdrawn. As James (2020, 64) puts it, "time passed, and he maintained his resolve to press on. His wife stayed with him all through, and by all accounts, he healed and repaired the family that he had almost damaged." Bishop Timothy Freyer (auxiliary bishop for the Diocese of Orange, California) offers a more nuanced perspective:

The practice of the faith wasn't just to save the marriage. I think it was also a way for him to draw closer to Christ, and hopefully anybody in any state, whether it's in a state of grace, whether it's in a state of problems, discouragement, family troubles, sin, that they, too, would follow his example and turn to the Church

and throw themselves at the feet of Christ (Hoffarth & Lowery, 2020).

Perhaps the most glaring example of Bryant's connection to religion was his predilection for tattoos, a few of which were replete with religious overtones. It is worth noting that "the tradition of Christian tattoos goes back hundreds of years in the Egyptian Coptic church but is relatively new in the West, and yet, a generation of young Catholics has found that the symbols of Catholicism—crosses, icons, rosaries, paintings and medals—easily translate into tattoo art" (Keating, 2013). Bryant got the "religious" tattoos done in 2003, the same year he was accused of rape (Pawar, 2020). Some of Kobe's tattoos are elaborate. Take for example the "angel wings" tattoo with the "angel nimbus" on the player's right arm,

he got this tattoo in reference to his wife, Vanessa, to whom he considered a blessing in his life. This tattoo is also inked in 2003 along with a 'Vanessa' tattoo. Generally, an 'angel wings with the angel nimbus' tattoo represents blessings, divine powers, support, guidance, spiritual protection, and divine love ("Kobe Bryant 5 Tattoos..." 2020).

Underneath the angel wings on Kobe's bicep, are the words "Psalm XXVII." As for the tattoo's inspiration, it was an expression of remorse and an attempt at making amends with his wife, following the rape accusation (Marvi, 2020). It was also to show his unambiguous attitude to religion by means of demonstrating the fragment of Scripture that was near and dear to his heart (Brown, 2013).

Bryant also attached a fair amount of importance to the Rosary prayer, prompting plans for another tattoo, which he revealed on Twitter, writing: "A rosary over my right shoulder cap going down my arm maybe" (Kobe Bryant's Twitter account, 2013). Bryant died before such plans could be realized. One incident worth mentioning that demonstrates Bryant's attachment to the Rosary left an impression on Sister Rose Pacatte, the founding Director of the Pauline Center for Media Studies in Los Angeles (Culver City). Pacatte described a special moment, one in which she, a fellow sister, and the customers who were present that day will undoubtedly never forget. Pacatte posted a short story on Pauline.org about the day in 2004 when Bryant visited the aforementioned place: "He was looking for a special rosary for his wife, Vanessa. As the sister who was there tells the story, the other shoppers, obviously star-struck, stopped and looked in awe as he moved quietly around the shop" (Pacatte, 2020).

Another instance in which the Rosary was featured prominently occurred following his tragic death. Many people gathered at St. Paul The Apostle Catholic Church in Chino Hills, CA, to make rosaries in order to present to Bryant's church. They believed that helping to make the rosaries constituted a way of beginning the healing process over the tragic death of Bryant and the others on that helicopter. One of the volunteers, Gigi Macaraeg, expressed this: "The rosary is a very powerful healing tool and I believe a lot of people were hurt and are still hurting over Kobe's death. And the fact that we will be donating this to Kobe's parish and distributing it will bring a lot of healing" (Silva & Chidbachian, 2020). Interestingly, at the makeshift memorial created after Bryant's death in the L.A. Live plaza across from Staples

Center, Catholic-themed objects included not only crosses and candles, but also rosaries, which were draped on numerous photographs depicting him (Hoffarth & Lowery, 2020).

It is also important to note that Bryant regularly attended his local church. As the Catholic News Agency informed, “Bryant and his wife have been reported to be regular parishioners at an Orange County, California parish, and after his death, some on social media said that he had been seen at Mass before the helicopter ride that ended his life” (“The Catholic faith...”, 2020). The name of the church in question is the Our Lady Queen of Angels Catholic Church in Newport Beach. As Julie Hermes, a spokesperson for the aforementioned church, confirmed that Bryant was present at Mass on the morning of the helicopter crash. She said that Bryant would often sit somewhere at the back and would leave before the end to avoid disturbing the other parishioners. She added: “He was very much loved at the church, and he was very devout, very dedicated to his faith” (Pepper, 2020). Steve Sallot, the parish priest, remembered him as a man of faith. He recalled their meeting on the day before the fatal flight: “We shook hands, and I saw that he had blessed himself because there was a little holy water on his forehead. So, I knew that he’d gone into the chapel to pray and came out and blessed himself. And then we spoke for a minute, shook hands, and then off he went” (“Kobe Bryant Visited...”, 2020).

What Kobe prayed that morning, no one knows. Undoubtedly though, he prayed at Mass each week saying: “Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy. Lord have mercy” (Beck, 2020). As Father Beck emphasizes, referring to the difficult past experience that Bryant had gone through, “Kobe’s life is testimony that he meant the words of his prayer, and that his prayers were answered. Yes, his cracks were surely visible, but they were engulfed by the light shining through them for all the world to see” (Beck, 2020).

The shocking news concerning the death of the basketball superstar prompted numerous responses on social media. Also, representatives of the church reacted instantly. The Archbishop of Los Angeles (the nation’s largest Catholic community) José H. Gomez expressed his deep sadness on Twitter, offering prayers both for Bryant and his family. He even remembered his personal contact with the athlete, telling Catholic News Service:

I remember one time going to the Lakers’ practice, and I had a good conversation with him. We are praying for the eternal repose of his soul, his daughter who also died and for the family. It must be a very challenging time for his family. So, let’s pray for him and pray for his family (“Remembering Kobe Bryant...”, 2020).

The aforementioned bishop Timothy Freyer emphasized the huge impact Kobe Bryant had on the people around him. He also paid attention to his modesty, the fact that he did not flaunt his fame and wealth:

Kobe inspired us through his words and actions to set our goals, work hard and achieve our dreams. He was a committed Catholic who loved his family and loved his faith. A longtime Orange

County resident and parishioner in our Diocese, Kobe would frequently attend Mass and sit in the back of the church so that his presence would not distract people from focusing on Christ's Presence (Bishop Timothy Freyer's Facebook page, 2020).

Fellow parishioners also shared stories. One of them, Dominic Picarelli, stated that he had seen Bryant in church for a long time and was most impressed with the constant presence of the sports star, when his daughter Natalia and Picarelli's son went through the 2-year process of first Holy Communion. He remembered: "He was always there. Always. Always for his kids. You can always gauge a man's character by the way he treats children. He showed such patience when he was around kids. I never had a chance to tell him that; I feel bad I never did" (Hoffarth & Lowery, 2020). This confirms Bryant's dedication, both to his family and to his religious convictions.

Let us recall another meaningful example. Singer and actress Cristina Ballesterio, who comes from Anaheim, CA, described (2020¹) on Instagram her unexpected encounter with Bryant at Holy Family Cathedral in Orange, California at a Mass. She was tremendously excited with that fact, and describing the whole situation in detail underlined his good manners:

I was sitting in the very back of Holy Family Cathedral in Orange, CA, on a WEEKDAY mass. At the time I was very into wearing veils and on this particular day I had a scarf I used as veil. Right as mass begins, I see a huge shadow in my right peripheral vision and hear a decently loud creak from probably a big man. I double took to see... it was KOBE BRYANT IN THE SAME PEW AS ME ON THE OTHER END! I just went about my normal praying and singing as usual cause he like all of us came to pray. Thank God I had the veil so I could stay focused on Jesus not this insanely talented Basketball player my whole family has looked up to and watched our whole lives. As we went up to communion, he waited for me to go. If you grew up in the Catholic Church, you understand this is a respectful thing, men do in church as a sign of respect to women.

All these reactions demonstrate that Kobe definitely had an impact on the local community; they also suggest that "Kobe Bryant was everything but ordinary" (James, 2020, 1). He often made a point of pursuing important things in life. He was aware that sporting achievements were not of paramount importance in the grand scheme of things. This is corroborated by the following words: "Now, championships come and go. Right? There's going to be another team that wins an NBA Championship, another player that wins another MVP award. But if you really want to create something that lasts generations, you have to help inspire the next generation..." (James, 2020, 1).

¹ Cristina Ballesterio's Instagram account. 2020. January 26, accessed November 15, 2020 https://www.instagram.com/p/B7y_av7FDnS/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

The Bryant Family Foundation

Although Bryant will be remembered most of all by means of his work ethos and incredible sports successes, his influence extends beyond sport. Attaching great importance to his Catholic faith and having instilled in him Catholic social teaching (including the ideas of solidarity, common good or wealth distribution), the athlete decided not to restrict himself to sport. He once stated:

I don't want to look back and just say, "Well, I had a successful career because I won so many championships and scored so many points." There's something else that you have to do with that. You have to do something that carries a little bit more weight to it, a little more significance, a little more purpose to it (Pepper, 2020).

Bryant was one of the highest paid athletes in the world. As James (2020, 66) notes, "estimates from CNN have indicated that Kobe likely made \$16 million a year from endorsement deals alone." At the moment of the retirement in 2016, Bryant's salary and endorsements gave him a net worth of \$680 million (as it was estimated by Forbes). The subsequent growth of his fortune was not precisely analyzed (Telford, 2020). Yet after the tragic death, his fortune was estimated at \$600 million (James, 2020, 68).

Despite his good fortune, Bryant was apparently not unfamiliar with the old adage "to whom much is given, much is expected." Bryant tied his Catholic faith to a family commitment to help the poor. This resulted in the establishment of the Kobe & Vanessa Bryant Family Foundation in 2007. The original name of the foundation was VIVO. Following the deaths of Bryant and his daughter, Vanessa changed the name of their family non-profit. It is now called the Mamba and Mambacita Sports Foundation, honoring Kobe and Gianna (Lee, 2020). As for financial questions, "from 2012 to 2017, the organization reported revenue of more than \$2.5 million" (Evans, 2020).

As Lisi (2020) notes, emphasizing the painful past, which played a tremendous role in the way events unfolded:

Bryant's rise, fall and return to greatness is a wonderful redemption story rooted in Christian virtue. Was Bryant perfect? Not at all. Instead, he was a human who struggled with fame and temptation. Bryant repaired his marriage, a process that took years, and raised his children to be Catholic. Bryant and his wife also founded the Kobe and Vanessa Bryant Family Foundation dedicated to helping young people and the homeless.

The connections between religious convictions and Bryant's charitable activity were recalled by many observers, even religion journalists like Beck (2020), who notes the seriousness with which Bryant treated religion: "Bryant was a practicing Catholic who took his faith seriously, walking the talk. He attended Mass on Sundays—and some weekdays, too. He supported multiple charitable causes, including his own family foundation dedicated to improving the lives of youth

and families in need”. The foundation mentioned here was the embodiment of his ambitious vision. As for the main aim of this institution, it

is dedicated to improving the lives of youth and families in need, both domestically and globally, and encouraging young people to stay active through sports. The Foundation provides financial resources, develops unique programs and raises awareness for relevant issues in order to strengthen communities through educational and cultural enrichment opportunities (“The Kobe & Vanessa...” [n.d.](#)).

The foundation helps fund shelters for young people and realizes other projects designed to serve the poor. As for homelessness, Bryant stated that it is an issue “that kind of gets pushed on the back burner because it’s easy to point the blame at those who are homeless and say, “Well, you made that bad decision. This is where you are. It’s your fault.” In life, we all make mistakes and to stand back and allow someone to live that way and kind of wash your hands of it ... that’s not right” (“The Catholic faith...”, [2020](#)). This shows that the problems that tend to be pushed to the margins of society constituted a source of considerable concern for Bryant.

Bryant did a lot to support and inspire young people, especially athletes. The Mamba Sports Academy Project Play 2020 was intended to improve the health of young people by fighting “the epidemic of physical inactivity” (James, [2020](#), 67). The activity supporting programs helping students develop skills needed to succeed focused not only on America, but became an international undertaking:

Kobe was affiliated with the After-School All-Stars (ASAS) and acted as the official ambassador. The non-profit organization offers programs to children in thirteen different cities. Kobe also had a partnership with the Ching Ling Foundation after starting the Kobe Bryant China Fund. Money from the funds is used for charities in China that are focused on education and health (James, [2020](#), 70).

Bryant showed sensitivity toward children, especially those struggling with life-threatening illnesses and spared no pains to help them over many years. According to the Make-A-Wish foundation, over the span of his career, Bryant met with many critically ill children to fulfill their life-changing wishes. Prior to retiring, Bryant often invited kids to games (Christian [2020](#)). As Lauren Lee from CNN notes,

Over the last 20 years, Bryant granted more than 250 wishes of children battling life-threatening illnesses through the Make A Wish Foundation. The foundation’s Facebook page called Bryant “an amazing wish granter who has brought countless smiles to our wish kids and their families” (Lee, [2020](#)).

The above-presented line of thinking and a desire to help those in need may have directed Bryant’s attention to an institution that has come to occupy a special place in the hearts of Black Americans—the Smithsonian National Museum

of African American History and Culture, of which Kobe was a founding donor—the only national museum devoted exclusively to the documentation of African American life, history, and culture (“National Museum...”, [n.d.](#)). His donation played an important role in the early phase of the realization of the undertaking. As for the sum, he and his wife “donated at least \$1 million” (Lee, [2020](#)). On the day of the opening of the Museum, that is September 24, 2016, Bryant tweeted (Christian [2020](#)), “Go. See. This. Museum. There is no greater testament to this country than the stories in this building. Honored to be a part of it @NMAAHC”.

This statement below issued by the Museum after Kobe’s death shows the board’s appreciation and gratitude of the board for Bryant’s support.

For us at the NMAAHC, Kobe holds a very special place in our hearts. In the very critical stages of building the museum, Kobe and Vanessa Bryant became founding donors, giving us the boost that we needed to keep moving forward. Kobe also had the opportunity to visit the museum before its opening. He was so moved by the experience that he later donated his uniform jersey from the 2008 NBA Finals, the year he was named the league MVP. For his many gifts to the museum and for the example he set for athletes and fathers, we are forever grateful to Kobe Bryant and will miss him deeply (“National Museum...”, [2020](#)).

Kobe’s accomplishments in the areas of charity and teaching and mentorship exceed what is typical for someone of his stature. This is not to say that celebrities do not financially support worthy causes, they do. However, Kobe’s deeds were about legacy building. The words of one of Bryant’s former teammates, Metta World Peace (an interview in CNN), uttered shortly after the announcement of the death of the athlete and his daughter in the helicopter crash, sums up Kobe well—“He’s leaving a legacy, and he’s teaching people how to be more than just an athlete” (Lee, [2020](#)).

Conclusion

America’s historical obsession with both sport and religion has, in recent years, drawn the attention of numerous scholars. As Kyle ([2018](#), 22) rightly notes, “from the beginning America was certainly Christian in a cultural sense”. In the last decades, the country became more secular and although religion is gradually losing influence in broadly understood public life or is even being pushed out of it by political ideologies, it does not necessarily concern American sports arenas. The face of modern sport has been changing on account of numerous factors, such as commercial and technological innovations, but religious concerns still pervade stadiums. One of the main reasons is that faith can serve as a performance enhancer.

This article brought together two areas of scholarship (sport and religion) through an analysis of one of sport’s greatest icons—Kobe Bryant. In doing so, it adds to the scholarship on the importance of religion in the culture of sport. Given the increased focus on this kind of research, it is not surprising that more and more case studies seeking to address the presence of religion in sport have emerged.

What turns a national celebrity into a real sports hero is, among other things, the person's character (Holt & Mangan, 1996, 10). Therefore, when analyzing the complexities of athletes' lives, it makes sense to pay attention to what helped shaped a given figure. As already alluded to, the purpose of this article was not only to shine a light on the remarkable story of Kobe Bryant, but most of all, to understand what role religion has played and continues to play in the case of the sportsman, by means of finding examples of religious manifestations, as well as utterances showing players deep attachment to the Catholic teaching. Religion was the driving force behind Bryant's career. In fact, some of Bryant's actions can best be understood within the context of his religiousness, the question of his foundation and numerous philanthropic actions being the most striking examples. Then, there is of course the religious-themed tattoos, his regular church attendance, the importance of prayer, and the Rosary.

The phenomenon of prayer in sport constitutes a broad and fascinating research area. As Shirl Hoffman notes, "in no age has prayer become so woven into the fabric of sports as in the modern era" (Hoffman, 2010, 240). This commonly observed religious practice, which is supposed to help enhance the athletes' performance, takes many forms. Sport is undoubtedly far more than mere entertainment. Religion allows one to believe that life has some purpose. The legacy of Bryant continues through the fruits of his charitable activity, built upon increased religious beliefs. This particular example demonstrates that religion has something important to offer in our social reality, that it can be a positive force for change.

It is reasonable to conclude that Kobe Bryant's career and the way he lived should be considered against the background of his moral attitudes, as religion played a prominent role in both his intellectual and character development. This article may prompt other scholars to embark on studies that examine the role of religion in the lives of athletes specifically and in sport generally.

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