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BOOK REVIEW

Nick J. Watson and Andrew Parker, eds. *Sports, Religion and Disability*. New York: Routledge, 2015. xviii + 238 pp. Hbk. ISBN 978-0-41571-415-0. \$160.00.

Recently awaiting the start of a presentation at an academic conference, I overheard an attendee say to her colleague: “I rarely find anyone investigating exactly what I’m working on.” This complaint did not strike me as a self-absorbed sentiment because researchers who tackle specialized inquiry can feel isolated when developing their own unique research path. The book under review is both an example and response to this growing problem in academia. It draws upon three areas of study—sports, religion, and disability—finding intersections among the three, and in so doing produces a specialized book. It also brings together writers from the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada to find common ground on issues, and thus initiates some groundbreaking research in this field of study.

Edited by two prominent sport and religion authors from the UK, the book arrives on the heels of the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. These global celebrations marked a time for reflection on the meaning and role of sport in a country that is often credited as the birthplace of modern sport and from which arose a modern movement of Muscular Christianity. Moreover, it was also in the UK where German medical doctor Sir Ludwig Guttmann initiated an international athletic competition for disabled WWII veterans, in effect establishing the forerunner to the Paralympic Games. Set within this historical context, the reviewed book examines how persons with disabilities may offer insight and direction into the future of sport. To do so with theology in mind, the editors rely on advances made in practice by organizations like the Special

Olympics and L'Arche and turn to reflections on disability by Christians like Jean Vanier and Stanley Hauerwas.

In a world often focused on success, riches, and fame—as appears to be the case frequently in elite sport—a theology of disability charts a different course and challenges the “cult of normalcy” (xiv) assumed by sporting participants and Christians alike. The editors and chapter contributors are concerned specifically with contemporary sport acting like a modern “Tower of Babel” (1). The book does not examine any sporting scandals from the London Games, but it criticizes the multi-billion dollar business of sport that relies heavily on commercialism, perfectionism, materialism, and a strong dose of a “winner-take-all” competitive spirit. Not belaboring the problems of contemporary sport, however, the book sets out to learn how research into disability, a theology of disability, and a theology of sport can offer a rich counterpoint to the dominant form of media-driven sport today.

The book offers a serious pastoral theology on sport and disability, drawing from mainstream thought about disability and creedal-based theology. The chapters are well-written, reveal strong academic content, and take the reader on a journey to specialized fields of thought probably not yet considered. It employs a diverse set of research methodologies, such as biblical theology, systematic theology, sociological analysis, phenomenological analysis, case studies, literature reviews, and other types of essays. A number of the fourteen chapters (ranging in length from eight to twenty-four pages) may be of interest especially to this journal's readership. Amos Yong, a prominent researcher in theology and disability, projects how he thinks St. Paul would view sport today (chapter 3). Drawing on a number of Pauline texts in perhaps the book's best chapter, he questions the dominant sporting ethos and imagines how sport should be “constituted at its center by those who are weak and otherwise socially ignored and marginalized” (52).

Pastoral theologian Graeme Watts (chapter 4) rightly argues that there are inherent problems with defining a specific theology of disability in sport—i.e., as if disabled persons do not count toward a proper theology of sport. In his clarification of

categories, nevertheless, he unwisely makes comparisons to a “theology of feminism” that he views as serving a “specific population” (65). Surely we can assert that the concerns of feminism embrace more than simply women!

I also appreciated a sociological examination of cyclist Lance Armstrong written by Andrew Meyer and Nick Watson, where theological reflection on a “spiritual hero-athlete” reveals the shortcomings of Armstrong (and the LiveStrong Foundation) and challenges secular viewpoints that seek faith only in the immanent world, exemplifying the “crisis of belief experienced in Western post-Christian society” (186).

Noteworthy, too, is an essay (chapter 13) by Timothy Shriver, Chairman of the Special Olympics, who leads an organization of over 4 million athletes that he argues promotes greater appreciation of common religious virtues.

A number of qualitative research studies are included: a phenomenological study investigates how sport and spirituality assisted in the rehabilitation of British Service men and women (chapter 5); a case study endorses a postcolonial approach to understand sport-based empowerment of people living with HIV/AIDS in Zambia (chapter 10); and another case study reflects on a father-son long distance running team (chapter 14). The depth of analysis in these and other qualitative research projects puts a face on disability, contextualizing it and revealing how it can show the mercy of God.

Chapter 6, written by University of Ottawa professor, Paul Heintzman, proposes a useful model on nature-based recreation, spirituality, and persons with disabilities drawn from a number of qualitative studies in leisure studies. It lays out antecedent conditions, settings, and the type of recreation that can produce both spiritual experiences and spiritual well-being. As our society faces increased rates of anxiety and depression, Heintzman’s model is part of a solution for persons with disability—whatever the disability may be. His concluding remarks propose implications for researchers and practitioners that stand taller than the editors’ own attempts at describing future research in the next chapter.

Chapter 7 turns out to be an exposition on qualitative

methodology promoting mixed methodologies and focus group research. Although the book overall incorporates theologically-based chapters, this future-looking chapter does not weave in these other strands of thought found in the book. As a reader, I want to know how the editors see possibilities for deeper theological thinking in the area, not only the benefits that might come to theology through engagement in qualitative study. This oversight is a serious omission. Strangely, this future research chapter is as close as the editors come to writing a concluding chapter—and it is situated in the middle of the book. Without a conclusion, the reader has limited insight into the perceived future for this field of study.

The book's strength—its many voices—is perhaps its greatest weakness. The potpourri of approaches in the book feels overly eclectic at times, accentuated by the randomness of the chapters' ordering. The best explanation for this organizational problem is the fact that almost all the chapters are reprints out of the first and second issues of the 2014 volume of the *Journal of Disability and Religion*. The chapters hang together more like a journal issue than an edited book. In fact, it is little wonder that the book lacks a subtitle when there is not a clearly articulated central idea woven throughout the text.

There are three further problems I wish to add to my critique. First, viewing disability as a prophetic sign toward a contemporary sporting ethos is a valuable critique, but when I recline to watch a Blue Jays baseball game tonight, should I feel guilty about cheering my team onto victory? Is there still a place for players and fans to want to win in sport? The book on occasion does allude to this desire as permissible, but I remain uneasy about the positive contribution of serious competition in the face of the prophetic sign of disability. A chapter examining this moral dilemma would be more than helpful.

Another problem of the book lies in the broadness of the chosen term “disability.” I think the book would have packed more punch if it would have been more discriminatory and emphasized Paralympians *or* Special Olympians. Greater specialization would have brought greater focus.

Thirdly and lastly, I appreciated chapter 8's examination of

celebration as a spiritual expression—an element in life and theology that is too often smugly overlooked or foolishly undervalued—but the chapter’s drawing upon central figures like Joseph Pieper and Jean Vanier is merely adequate and falls short of the inspiration found in these primary authors’ works. A richer recovery of their thought would be more beneficial.

Despite these shortcomings, why should libraries or persons purchase the book? It is well-suited for persons working in the area of pastoral theology and ministry with an interest in disability, as it insightfully investigates the particularly understudied area of sport. Those who minister to or have family members with disabilities would appreciate the in-depth qualitative studies that offer insight and support. As a reviewer, I not only appreciated the intellectual stimulation the book offers, I also found the in-depth reflection on disability good for my soul in that it consistently challenged me to better recognize my own subconscious acceptance of the “culture of normalcy.” The book also shows how theological reflection can enrich and direct future initiatives in the area of sport. That is no small accomplishment.

When I reflect again on the aforementioned professor’s statement about struggling with research isolation, I would think she would do well to find two editors like Watson and Parker in her field of study. A similar book to theirs could bring researchers with common interests together; such an edited project can be intellectually satisfying for authors and readers alike (despite this book’s organizational shortcomings). A book such as this one is only part of the solution, but this particular answer is definitely worth reading.

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