

**FOOTBALL AND
RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE:
SOCIOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS**

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Abstract

Football (“soccer”) is a central aspect of contemporary British, European and even global culture – as the build-up to big international events such as the European Championships and the World Cup shows. This seems to be in sharp contrast to the profile of religion in contemporary societies, which appears to be declining in social significance. One of the challenges to proponents of Secularisation Theory, however, is an approach which embraces the private, unofficial and experiential dimensions of religiosity and hence allows for an analysis of the links between phenomena such as football and religion.

This paper explores the ways in which football might be understood as a religion, including a search for transcendence. Though the comparison has been suggested before, the connections are specifically explored here with reference to key concepts within the sociology of religion, such as implicit religion and multi-dimensional models of religious commitment. The paper should be of interest to sociologists specialising in areas such as religion, sport & leisure, media studies and popular culture, and to those interested in the links between these fields.

Introduction

Football (“soccer”) is a central aspect of contemporary British, European and even global culture - as the build-up to big international events such as the European Championships and the World Cup shows. For those interested in understanding and exploring contemporary forms of religiosity, and what it is that makes (for example) people tick in terms of their daily orientation and meaning, one starting point is to look at those aspects of popular culture and experience which appeal to them and give them direction. Whether or not they are themselves interested in the sport, football is a significant feature of the culture in which most young people live in Britain (see the number of weekly magazines focusing just on football, for example). Perhaps this is why, despite the views of commentators such as the Archbishop of Canterbury, who cite comparatively higher church than match attendance figures, the fact is that in school playgrounds up and down Britain one does not find children talking about what happened in church the day before. Few playgrounds and workplaces, however, will be completely immune from discussions of the weekend’s football.

For reasons that shall be explained forthwith, I have come to the conclusion that studying the links between football and religion is more than an amusing interlude in my teaching; it contributes to that approach incorporated within sociology which locates religion within a multi-dimensional and socially grounded perspective. In defending such an approach, Stark and Glock (1969: 255) have stated:

Clearly, for those who hold religiousness to be a purely metaphysical phenomenon, beyond the senses and not connected with what men [sic] think, or say, or do, our work will be totally irrelevant – mere materialistic concern with mundane appearances ... But religion as we know it exists in the material world and cannot be comprehended wholly or even primarily in metaphysical terms.

(Stark and Clock, 1969: 255)

Today's "material world" is much more materialistically-oriented than when Clock and Stark were writing in the 1960s. I argue in this paper that, just as religion has been influenced by social and economic forces in the wider context of secularisation and globalisation, so it is with football, which is increasingly shaped by the forces of commercialism and profiteering. The institutional links between football and religion in England and Scotland are highlighted with a special focus on football and religion in Glasgow. The ways in which football might be understood as a religion are explored with particular reference to implicit religion and multi-dimensional models of religious commitment. The paper adopts a functionalist approach to football as religion, concluding with a consideration of its role in contemporary secular society.

Football and religion: A teaching tool

Many people find it easy to make comparisons between football and religion. This paper shows how it can be a useful way of introducing students to conceptual and methodological issues associated with the study of religions in social context. With sociology students, for example, by whom religion is often regarded and treated as a marginal subject area, I have explored ideas around meaning, orientation and identity associated with following football, as a way of introducing them to the significance of such concepts within more traditional forms of religion. With theology students, too, I have explored themes within football and religion, to highlight the value of studying religion in applied social and cultural contexts.

Most usefully, I use the idea of football as religion as a vehicle for exploring the different ways of defining and measuring religion and religiosity. Students respond in a variety of ways to the suggestion that football might, according to some definitions, be considered a religion itself. Some have no problem with this; others vehemently defend what they consider to be authentic religion from such an association. I explain to students that their initial attitude to this subject may well be telling them something about their assumptions about what real religion is, or ought to be, which may have an effect on their openness and ability to explore beyond their own sentiments and affiliations.

In this way I move on to introduce students to a phenomenological perspective and the techniques associated with trying to identify and understand the views of a believer that might be very different from one's own. It is not always so easy to set aside our values, or even to be aware of the fact that they may, more insidiously than we think, be preventing us from having an open mind. Hence an examination of the links between football and religion can help students to identify their own values in the area of religion and how this might affect their approach to its study.

The historical development of football

In Britain the standardised modern football code began to develop in the 1840s when, from an assortment, two codes evolved – the handling and the no-handling systems. In 1863 the Football Association was founded, from which comes the popular term "soccer"; while the alternative code (permitting the handling of both ball and opponents) was developed by the

Rugby Football Union in 1871 (Wagg 1995: 2). It is interesting to note that the institutional churches played a key role in the development of football by spreading the game throughout the British Isles:

In the case of association football the game was evangelised principally by employers and priests: many of the biggest and best known English clubs began life in the last century either as works teams or as church sides.

(Wagg 1995:2)

Arsenal, for example, took its name from a munitions factory in Woolwich; Sheffield United (founded at a cutlery firm) was nicknamed "The Blades" and West Ham United represented the Thames Ironworks. Other clubs evolved from parish teams, including Aston Villa, Bolton Wanderers, Everton (from which Liverpool evolved) and Southampton ("The Saints").

Today in England and Scotland football has attained the status of a national sport. As with the privileged position of the Church of England, certain advantages accrue to being a national sport, such as certain key events being part of the national calendar, and funding opportunities. Stuart Cosgrove (1986: 99) has highlighted the high status of football, stating that it is:

... simply the most significant national activity in Scotland. On the street corners, on television, at Hampden Park [the national football stadium in Glasgow] but most importantly on the bi-annual trips down to Wembley [for the England game in the Home International tournament, now defunct] football is the respirator.

(Cosgrove 1986: 99)

Indicative of its status, Hampden Park, which has staged most of Scotland's home internationals, received one of the largest Millennium Commission Awards in 1996 (£23 million) in recognition of the role football plays in Scotland's heritage. The Commission's publicity material detailing the award stated: "We believe the newly developed stadium will become a potent symbol of pride for Scotland's national sport for the twenty-first century."

The potential for sports such as football to kindle patriotic fervour and reinforce national pride can be seen on the occasion of international tournaments such as the European Championships and the World Cup. England's semi-final defeat by Germany in Euro '96 became the headline story in all the domestic newspapers, while television viewing figures reached record levels, surpassing the 22.8 million audience for the Princess of Wales's interview on *Panorama* (*The Independent* 26.vi.96). Indeed, football seems to have been much more successful in generating a sense of national feeling than the then government's erstwhile efforts to define the politics of the beef crisis in terms of national interests and European assaults on Britain.

Football, religion and community

Applying a functionalist perspective to social institutions, McGuire comments on the role of religion in reinforcing a sense of community:

Religion is one contributing factor in societal integration. Religious symbols can represent the unity of the social group, and religious rituals can enact that unity, allowing the individual to participate symbolically in the larger unity they represent.

(McGuire 1992: 176)

In support of the view that football – with its symbols, rituals and social functions – can be considered in religious terms, the association between football and ideas of shared

community is easy to see. Where football clubs grew out of church or parish associations, there has also often been retained an explicit religious link between team and denomination. Nowhere is this more marked than in Glasgow. The religious and football based sectarianism in that city reflects a further point made by McGuire, namely that consensus and conflict are both significant when it comes to communities:

We must keep in mind that cleavage and conflict are, in many respects, merely the 'other side of the coin' of cohesion and consensus.
(McGuire 1992: 185)

There are two teams in Glasgow: Glasgow Rangers was founded in 1872 and has since then been identified with Protestantism. Glasgow Celtic originated in 1887 exclusively for Catholics (as did Hibernian in Edinburgh), having been set up by Catholic priests as part of a campaign to raise poor relief for recent Irish migrants and keep them in the faith (Murray 1984: 18). The two teams have dominated club football in Scotland since the 1890s in a rivalry that has few parallels anywhere else in the world (Wagg 1995: 5).

Social conflict between Rangers and Celtic is also an expression of religious conflict, and antagonism is frequently expressed in religious terms. Wagg identifies Rangers' management and supporters as emblems of the Protestant faction, as are historically its players. In 1989, for example, there was uproar in the city when a Catholic player – Mo Johnston of Celtic – signed for Rangers. Reflecting efforts to end this harmful sectarianism, the Scottish press talked about the incompatibility of religious bigotry with the idea of the European Super League being discussed at the time (Wagg 1995: 16). While Rangers' management appear to have embraced more effectively a modern and enterprising approach to football, Celtic appear to appeal more directly to traditional communal loyalties based on Irishness and Catholicism. According to Moorhouse (1991: 208), Celtic represents the older unregenerated sectarian Glasgow. Indeed, some have suggested that the identity of Rangers' supporters consists primarily of anti-Catholic feeling rather than a particular Protestant-based identity.

The persistence of the Catholic/Protestant divide in Glasgow is probably exceptional but it is not the only example. South of the border in Liverpool, for example, the same historical pattern of Irish immigration is reflected in a traditional identification of Everton FC with Catholicism and Liverpool FC with Protestantism, though the link has much faded. In days gone by the schoolboys' team *Liverpool Catholic Boys* reinforced the link between football and religious identity -though, as an indicator of secularisation, this team is today known as *Merseyside Boys*.

The association between religion, football and community is not unique either to Britain or to soccer. Alomes (1993) refers to Catholic, Protestant and Jewish affiliations within Australian Football. He outlines the history of a Protestant Churches' League in the northern suburbs of Essendon in the 1950s and '60s, which was matched by a Catholic equivalent in neighbouring Collingwood. He also cites a recurring local folk tale:

In 1966 when St. Kilda, with strong Jewish support from that suburb, won its first premiership by one point over Collingwood on the Day of Atonement, many religious Jews forgave Ian Synman for being at the centre half back rather than in the synagogue, while the transistor radio allowed the good news to be brought to the doubly faithful.
(Alomes 1993: 47)

Sociologists such as Bryan Wilson (1982) have outlined the function of religion in reinforcing community by embracing a sense of ancestry, heritage and history as well as a sense of present identity and representing hopes for the future. Similarly, the sense of community in

football often carries themes of both individual and family identity, with children following the affiliations of their parents and, in days gone by, their locality. This reflects what Alomes refers to as “regeneration – individual and social” to be found in football.

At the same time, and in line with McGuire’s analysis, expressions of both consensus and conflict are to be found in both religion and football. Indeed, the media and others frequently give disproportionate attention to the negative aspects of conflict in football in the form of hooliganism and violence. In seeking to understand the motivation behind such expressions of sectarian conflict, analysts of football might learn from interpretations of religious violence. McGuire states that, where a religion is particularistic or exclusivist (that is, it is identified as the one, and only, true way), the potential for expressed conflict is greater. As with religion, few football fans convert.

The above examples have highlighted that, where footballing allegiance overlaps with other sources of identity (be they denominational, ethnic or cultural), its ideological significance is stronger. In the Scottish context, an interesting theme for further research would be the future effects on footballing sectarianism within Glasgow of nationalist politics and moves towards devolution. In the case of Australia, analysts such as Alomes see football as functioning to unite rather than divide society. He refers to “the politically hegemonic implications of a sport which pervades all classes and transcends gender” (1993: 155). In England and Scotland, however, social, religious and economic associations within football have meant that, historically, the opposite has often been true. Fishwick (1989: 150), for example, describes the football grounds of post-war England as “the Labour Party at prayer”.

Some argue that deep-seated social divisions are still reflected and reinforced in football. While this conflict can be healthy in the case of friendly rivalry and a sense of local or national pride, there are of course occasions when conflict leads to jingoistic racism (as happened in the British tabloid press’s coverage of the Euro ‘96 semi-final between England and Germany), violence and vandalism. In 1977 a home international match between Scotland and England at Wembley became the arena for the expression of the strength of Scottish nationalist feeling. Scottish supporters took away lumps of earth from England’s stadium, chanting “Give us an Assembly and we’ll give you back your Wembley!” (Cosgrove 1986: 107).

Football as implicit religion

A deeper exploration of the relationship between football and religion raises questions about the very nature and definition of religion itself, and the discussion of whether football ought to be included in religious categories. This connects with an ongoing debate within the sociology of religion with regard to attempts to define, measure and operationalise religiosity. One of the most helpful ways this has been explored is through the concept of implicit religion – particularly as it also acknowledges the link between religion and trends in wider culture.

In setting the scene for discussions of implicit religion, Edward Bailey (1990: 484) refers to the general shift in contemporary culture away from traditional institutional expressions of religiosity, towards acceptance of the implicit, the emotional, the symbolic, the popular, the anecdotal and the autobiographical. In terms of contemporary forms of religiosity, he discusses a reality which is “distinct both from religiosity (in the conventional sense) and secularity” (1990: 483). This broader approach to the study of religion suggests a possible opening for football to be considered in religious terms *vis-à-vis* its symbols, language, rituals

and emotions. With this in mind, consider the following definition cited by Bailey (1990: 484):

The concept of implicit religion tends to reveal the system of symbols that builds feelings and strong motivations in man [sic] through the formulation of 'basic' ideas about existence; the concept of implicit religion builds around the system of symbols such a layer of factuality that those feelings and motivations appear to be truly realistic, without reference to an explicit global, lay or confessional structure.
(Nesti 1985: 65-6)

A further definition of implicit religion refers to "an unrestricted personal quest for meaning in life in terms of actual experience" (Schools' Council Working Paper 1971: 34). It seems to me that, in terms of these approaches at least, there is mileage in exploring further the idea of football as religion.

So far this paper has focused on institutional, community-based aspects of football and religion. However, just as religion is much more than institutional affiliation and identity, so it is with football. What is needed is a multi-dimensional approach to football as religion, such as the model developed by Glock and Stark. In 1969 they sought to address the problem of defining and measuring religiosity and religious people by outlining five dimensions. The extent to which these may be applied to football shall now be explored.

Five dimensions of religious commitment

Stark and Glock initially highlight the belief dimension, referring to the existence of a certain theological outlook: believers acknowledge the truth of certain basic tenets and ratify a common set of beliefs. In football, the formal rules of the game (codified in 1863 by the Football Association) have already been referred to. These are accepted as the benchmark for making judgements about right and wrong behaviour on the pitch. Just as there is an element of faith beyond rational logic within religious belief (for example, belief in a good and omnipotent God even when bad things happen), so it is with believing a team or player to be "the best" - even when their performance and results defy such a conclusion.

The second dimension – religious practice – refers to acts of worship, ritual and devotion, including attending formal public acts and sacred practices. The regular ritualistic practice of going to every game can be identified as fulfilling this criterion. In recent years, however, as with church-going, attendance figures have fallen. In common with the phenomenon of "believing without belonging" (Davie 1995), one has to be cautious in drawing conclusions about the degree to which commitment can be measured using attendance data. With football participation increasingly taking place through the medium of television and satellite channels, football offers an example of television evangelism extending beyond the traditional religious field.

Other ritualistic aspects of football fandom which have been identified include the donning of the colours of the team – both by players and supporters – as symbolic of a common identity and goal. Many people who attend football matches on a regular basis would be able to identify both personal and shared elements of ritualistic (often superstitious) behaviour which is bound up in the hopes and prayers for success. Glock and Stark also include as part of this dimension impromptu hymn-singing and contemplation. Teams in Britain aspiring to the ultimate accolade of playing at Wembley are encouraged throughout the season by the regular rendition of a range of football hymns, many derived specifically from Christian roots. *The Road to Wembley* takes on the symbolic significance of pilgrimage with pilgrims singing all year and, more specifically, in the final stages of the Cup

competitions: “We’re all going to Wembley!”. This was reflected in the FA Cup competition’s billboard advertisements encouraging television viewing of the closing rounds (see Figure 1).



Figure 1 “Many are Called but Two are Chosen”

Religious symbolism here also extends to the realm of language, with players and even managers often being described as using religious terminology. Maradona’s “hand of God” incident in the 1987 World Cup is now infamous. When the internationally acclaimed player Juninho joined Middlesbrough in October 1995, the club were prepared to pay £4,750,000 for a player described as “God” and “miracle worker”. Religious language was also evident in the account and aspirations associated with John Hall’s arrival at Newcastle in 1995 amid plans for the club’s resurrection. For example, *The Daily Telegraph* (23.x.95), under the heading “Newcastle Promised Deliverance via a Sporting New Age”, referred to entrepreneur John Hall as “the crusader” who “vows to get ‘Geordie nation’ on the move”. It is an interesting paradox that, in our seemingly secular society, fans and commentators so regularly attribute religious qualities to the heroes of the game.

Linked with this we turn to Glock and Stark’s third dimension, that of experience. This refers to direct subjective knowledge of ultimate reality. It may take the form of contact with a supernatural agency or transcendental authority. In particular, Glock and Stark appear to be stressing here feelings, perceptions and sensations: in other words, the subjective aspects of religious experience.

At first sight this appears to be where the analysis of football as religion breaks down. If concepts such as “the ultimate” and “transcendence” are intended to refer to phenomena which are specifically beyond this world, then clearly football – as a worldly phenomenon – cannot be understood as religion.

However, crucial to this debate is the definition and interpretation of these terms and the relative significance given to the subjective element of religious experience within these categories. Alomes, for example, identifies the elements of transcendence offered to devotees as one of the major aspects of football as religion. Here sociologists can draw on a

legacy that goes back to Durkheim (1912), who defines the transcendent in relation to the crowd, and the uplifting of individuals beyond themselves into the higher order of the community or society of which they are a part. Reinforcing the subjective dimension of experience, Durkheim highlights the effervescence of the crowd as part of the sacred experience which consists of being aware of something: a force, much bigger and beyond oneself.

This aspect of the experience dimension is one which football spectators quite readily identify with. Describing Grand Final day in Australian football, Manning Clark writes:

It is a day for 'an emotional bath of agony and ecstasy' with 'magical moments rather like an epiphany' as well as 'all the absurdity of human passions there in excess'. And the religion could offer fear as well as hope, the prospect of heaven or hell, as the game enters the time-on period in the last quarter. Then none of the wisdom of the ages will help.
(Manning Clark 1988)

Focusing more specifically on the transcendent experiences of athletes themselves, Murphy and White (1995) record accounts of being "in the zone", of sport lifting participants in a way that they feel is best described using religious language and which is, effectively, religious experience. This sort of approach highlights an important debate within the sociology of religion: namely, the extent to which credence is given to participants' accounts and interpretations of their experiences.

Glock and Stark's fourth dimension is that of knowledge dimension. Related to – but not necessarily synonymous with – belief, this dimension of religious commitment refers to knowing basic tenets of faith, rites, scriptures and traditions (see Figures 2 and 3). Again, it is easy to apply this dimension to those football devotees who collect memorabilia and verbosely recite the facts about League appearances of players and team results. The growth in recent years in team and general football fanzines and magazines highlights the viability of tapping this interest for commercial gain.

Finally, Glock and Stark discuss the consequences dimension. This refers to the effects of the first four dimensions on thought and action in everyday life, and is both part of and follows on from religious commitment. The key question here is the extent to which devotion becomes part of everyday life. Clearly, one needs to distinguish between degrees of commitment here, but there is certainly evidence that, for some individuals and communities at least, commitment to football is a very significant part of daily thought and conversation. Describing "the permeation of daily life by football", Alomes suggests that:

... the permeation goes beyond attendances and TV audiences. In the workplace and in daily life football can be pervasive, although often in the form of an agreed reference point, a 'weather' type of subject, a conversation opener, a matter of verbal habit rather than of deeper engagement.
(Alomes 1993: 56-7)

Here it is perhaps helpful to refer back to our earlier discussion of the significance of football in certain contexts in overlapping and reinforcing cultural, denominational and ethnic sources of identity and socio-political dynamics. In this respect, the permeation of daily life by football, and its high profile in the identity of cities such as Liverpool, Newcastle and Glasgow, becomes easier to understand.



Figure 2 “The Quest for the Holy Grail continues in the Fifth Round of the FA Cup’



Figure 3 “Heaven and Hell are the Same Place”

Evangelism in football: its cultural export

Just like the missionary religions, football has been transported globally through colonialism. Wagg (1995) outlines in detail how the game of Association Football first developed in Britain, and how the British (specifically the English and Scots) first transported the game to other countries and cultures. In the first chapter of *Giving the Game Away*, Wagg examines this process and describes how the “missionary status” of the England team has become part of the myth and national melodrama incorporated into the popular British media’s coverage of the game.

As well as its social and cultural influence, football’s commercial growth has also been extended through mass communications, particularly television. As stated earlier, there are clear parallels here between sport and religion, with football being a further example of the shift to televisual evangelism and privatised consumption in one’s own home, as opposed to

the physical gathering of communities at a place of symbolic sacred status. Alomes has termed this the “new world of private televisual spirituality” (1993: 60).

Symptomatic of the increasing commercialism in football was the establishment in 1992 of the Premier League involving the top clubs in England who can now make sponsorship and media deals beyond the control of the Football League. Wagg explains that The Premiership:

... is sponsored by the lager company Carling and B Sky B, the satellite TV channel owned by News International, has paid 300 million pounds for the right to show live matches over a five-year period. To appease public opinion, since satellite TV still serves a small minority of homes in England, a subsidiary deal gives recorded highlights to the BBC, the public service channel. English football’s cultural transition from people’s game to television show, begun in the 1960s, seems virtually complete.

(Wagg 1995: 14)

In this context, contemporary debates about the loss of tradition in football (which is reflected both in the commentaries of sports writers and in the meetings of supporters clubs up and down the country) mirror those taking place within religious circles. Here debates about the secularisation of religion reflect on the loss of tradition and community as a consequence of changing patterns of social life, and the impact of these trends on religion itself as it too becomes commercialised and commodified.

Functions of football as religion in contemporary society

The sense and significance of community embraced within football goes beyond just sporting passion. This is illustrated most graphically in exceptional situations such as when those communities are affected by the death of players and/or supporters. Examples of this include football related disasters which have beset the game throughout its history (such as at Ibrox, Bradford and Munich), and in the impact that can be seen when a prominent footballer dies.

In describing the funeral of a young footballer in Australia, Alomes refers to the way in which his funeral had “a deeper social resonance than that stemming merely from sporting passion” (1993: 61). The same can be seen in the sentiments associated with prominent figures associated with particular clubs, such as Liverpool FC where ex-managers Bill Shankly and Bob Paisley are now immortalised through permanent shrines at Anfield, the home ground.

Again involving Liverpool FC, the Hillsborough Stadium tragedy is an example of where implicit religious themes became explicit in the aftermath of the worst disaster in football history (Eyre 1996). After the death of 96 Liverpool fans during Liverpool’s FA Cup semi-final match with Nottingham Forest, over a million visitors made the pilgrimage to Anfield (Liverpool’s home ground) to pay their respects. At this time, ultimate questions such as why God allowed this to happen were asked. It is interesting to note that, at times of anomie such as this, the traditional sectarianism between the city’s rival teams faded away, and in fact expressions of sympathy from throughout the football world were offered in the first few weeks.

At this time the link between football and religion was quite explicit in a city which has both a strong Christian and a footballing heritage, as discussed earlier. Memorial services were held both in the city’s cathedrals and at Anfield which, ever since, has been one of the main foci during anniversaries. Gilliat (1996) has examined the religious content of civic services, such as the one after Hillsborough and the one for those affected by the Cromwell Street

murders. While she noted that the concern in the latter was not to marginalise either those in Gloucester of non-Christian faiths (in what was a strong inter-faith community) or those of no faith at all, in Liverpool the opposite was true. Both in the immediate aftermath of Hillsborough and in the years since, the significance of both football and Christianity as part of the religious make-up of the community are reflected in the rituals and symbols of commemoration. This highlights a further important point – namely that, in discussing football and traditional religion, one need not necessarily exclude or compete with the other. Both football and Christianity are part of the religious culture of that and other cities.

Football and religion: concluding comments

This last comment is important because some have suggested a direct link between the rise of football as a prominent cultural form and the decline of traditional religiosity in a way which might imply their incompatibility. For example, Alomes writes:

In the late twentieth century when the Judaeo-Christian-derived teleologies of both material progress for the society and career progress for the individual have lost some of their paradisaical sheen, other ideas of transcendence have become more important. Today traditional religion can seem to some institutional and out of date ... In this situation it is perhaps inevitable that the more suburban transports of the delights of football – even when mediated by television – will offer contemporary consolation for many.

(Alomes 1993: 52-3)

It is suggested here that we should think beyond a sense of competition between traditional meaning systems and alternative forms of religiosity, and the notion that one will necessarily replace the other. In the context of the secularisation debate, studies of the dynamic nature of religiosity have shown that the reality is probably much more complex than this and that, instead, sport and religion can quite easily accommodate each other, operating alongside, and even complementing each other. In this way there are parallels here in terms of the co-existence of both denominational and civil religion (Bellah 1967); indeed, football may well in future retain a prominent place in the civil religion of societies like Britain where it is a national sport.

In concluding the discussion raised here as to whether football is itself religion, it is argued that the answer will depend on the definition of religion applied and the analytical tools used to measure it. In this paper I have argued on the basis that religion is part of the overall quest for meaning and transcendence in contemporary society. That quest takes many forms – some more traditional, others more secular. In line with Alomes I would want to state that today, “when the search for transcendence takes many forms, football offers one possibility” (1993: 52).

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