

# Hooliganism as a Postmodern “Religion”: Theological Reflections and Contemporary Sociological Narratives (Note 1)

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## Abstract

According to specific theories which are developing a special sociological methodology, sports in general manifest as a complex social phenomenon and its study allows us to investigate aspects of the social organization of modern societies. Sports are not an autonomous event of human activity. We can observe an institutional subset of sports in the wider set of society and the dynamics that develop within its contexts. The stadium, as a point of reference for a sports club, is considered an element that actually contributes to the construction of the public space. Through contemporary narratives, we will also try to approach the very special “language” of the “sports fan religiosity”.

**Keywords:** religion, sports, sociology, postmodernity, religiousness

## 1. Introduction

Since sport is not absent from any society (Note 2), the special Sociology of sport seems to examine sport in its social dimensions, but also the ways in which sporting events can affect social relations. In particular, it is clearly recorded that sports can contribute to socialization, forming a special social structure, forming equally special identities that can be related to or strengthen others such as national, religious, etc. (Henslin, 2009). For these reasons, sport is also examined from the point of view of the Sociology of Culture. Dealing with a complex question such as the subject this paper sets, for start we can answer if the so called Abrahamic Religions and especially Christianity, is actually in favor or even more promoting sports, as a way of life etc. We will also refer to specific examples given from the life of the Christian Orthodox Church.

## 2. Christianity, Sports and Society

These examples are connected in a unique way to the issue of the socially damaging "sports fans religiosity". These examples can also confirm the ecumenical message of Christianity, within the context of dealing with social pathogens such as hooliganism. After all, religions can contribute in order to empower and expand global consensus and a spirit of understanding, peace and dialogue between different nations, different cultures etc. As Judaism is concerned, Sports can be the opportunity to highlight the “God given talent” of an individual, while athletic excellence can be considered as one of the manifestations of beauty in this world (Carney, 2020). Examining now the relation between Islam and Sports, we deal with the opinion that muslim jurists are often obliged to issue fatwas (religious opinions) “in the response to hundreds of queries about the legitimacy of sporting activities” (Shavit & Winter, 2011). As Islam is considered, it is also mentioned that due to specific barriers that the Islamic Law or even several manifestations of Islam set to women, participating or even watching sports can be considered as something against Islamic religious and social values (Walseth & Fasting, 2003).

Saint Nestor, is considered to be the patron saint of football players and coaches (Note 3). The life of the Saint, which is conjoined with the life of his friend Saint Demetrius, is full of spiritual struggles that were the prerequisite for good physical condition, in order to face the various challenges of life. The duel between Saint Nestor and the ferocious pagan wrestler Lyaos is well known, in which the Saint won a unique and memorable victory (Note 4). In addition, the special care and interest of Saint Nektarios (Kefalas), bishop of Pentapolis, for sports and especially football is also well known. In a related speech Saint Nektarios, “About Gymnastics” (in Greek: *Περί Γυμναστικής*), on the occasion of the establishment of a Gymnastic Association in Kymi of Evia, he emphasizes the value of sports especially for young people (Eftihiadis, 2001). As the Director of the Rizareios Ecclesiastical School, he had organized a football team with students of the School, while he took care of the development of the high spiritual attitude also through sports. For Saint Nektarios, man is a single psychosomatic entity, which is why spiritual and physical exercise are of particular importance (Giannakopoulou B., 2014 p. 326). Physical exercise

shapes the spiritual and mental world of man, creating integrated, responsible and useful citizens for society (Eftihiadis, 2001).

It is now commonplace, especially for the residents of the two big cities (Athens and Thessaloniki) of Greece, to excessively associate the term "Religion" with a sports association, most commonly with a football club – a "team", in general term. And the greater the group's influence, the more strongly a latent "fan religiousness" is manifested. The inclusion and overemphasis of the term "Religion" in the followers' slogans make up the colorful, interesting but also perhaps alarming context of the aforementioned trend, always in the perspective of an as well interesting "fan religiosity". In the perspective of the investigation of "fan religiosity", Professor of Sociology of Sports at National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Nikolaos Patsantaras, claims that: "*Football clubs in general as social institutions are characterized by a structural laxity, a fact that also marks the hetero-referential definition of limits of the autonomy of football institutions*" (Patsantaras, 2023).

### 3. Further Discussion

It would not be an exaggeration to argue that the obsession with the socially distorted fanatical religiousness develops corresponding fundamentalisms, which manifest themselves in an analogous - violent way in the public space. In the case of Greece, the phenomenon of hooliganism began to develop strongly in the 1980s, with its first dynamic manifestation in the stadiums of Great Britain in 1960 and from there (Karatrandos, 2022 p. 3). Hooliganism could therefore be considered as a multidimensional situation that is imposed in the public space, on the occasion of sporting events and not only. The multidimensional character of the above phenomenon can also be linked to specific social organizations (e.g. fan associations) and Media (e.g. fan newspapers and electronic fan press) that aim to maintain any pathogens, regardless of the social cost, as this expands any influence they may have on specific fan subsets (Oliver & Myers, 1999). Ellis (2014) who expands all the above thoughts within the context of a post modern "Theology of Sports", also mentions that: "The sports pages of our newspapers give ample evidence of an interest in the physiological and even psychological aspects of sports performance". The special sentiment that actually uplifts an individual, strengthening the ties between a special community and a single person, can also get emphasized by "ritualistic aspects of football fandom" (Eyre, 1997 p. 6), or even religious symbolism that actually extends the realm of language itself (Eyre, 1997 p. 7). Rebecca Alpert (2015) also mentions that "playing and watching sports is a deeply meaningful, celebratory ritual enjoyed by millions across the world". An also interesting view is that, given the homogenizing trend of globalization, the fortification behind groups of fanatics with reference to football clubs, becomes for people from very specific social classes perhaps even necessary, in order to preserve their cultural identity (Spaaij, 2007).

In the context of the modern sociological investigation of Religion, there is talk of the tendency to distance oneself from religious doctrines and traditions, while at the same time the need to refer to them. Within the framework of modern social reality, the once-dominant secular sociological perceptions regarding the 'Death of God' and the 'end of religion' appear outdated and obsolete. The former trend for radical reflection has been replaced by militant, obsessive, and aggressively anti-religious positions of a self-referential secularism (Denaxas, 2022). The trend of "believing without belonging" shapes the way in which modern religiousness is manifested in the public - social space (Davie, 1990). More specifically, the well-known English sociologist Gr. Davie, will speak of "substitute religion", in relation to the quality of religiousness in the modern world (Davie, 2000). Given the basic sociological principle that doctrines influence social behavior and the quality of social relations, any distortion in the religious reference may have very specific consequences in society itself. Again Davie will speak of a transition: "from the culture of obligation, to the culture of consumption" (Davie, 2010 p. 217), with religions relegated to product value (Denaxas, 2016 p. 163). It is also mentioned that within the context of the influence of post modern subcultures (Denaxas, 2023), such as "sports fan religiosity", Religion and Sports as somehow not only connected but even confused (Higgs, 1995).

As in the context of an "ideologicalization" and therefore alteration of religiousness, so also in the field of the investigation of fan religiosity, there is a correlation, absorption and even absolute inclusion in any fan ideology, of extreme stereotypical references mainly to the opponents, as well as identification with equally extreme perceptions and ideologies. More specifically, it is noted that: "The fanaticism of the Ultra movement's global participants supersedes the one-dimensional bounds of simple team support and rivalry. Although many Ultras groups owe their eminence to objectionable displays of racism and fascism, the majority seem to defy conventions of social mobilization, free expression, and cohesion across vast ideological and rooting divides" (Pantelick, 2022).

Given that the purpose of the Sociology of Sport is to: "recognize the conscious states, needs, perceptions, motivations, norms and values of those individuals who do or watch sport" (Avgerinos, 2007 p. 3), it is of particular importance to examine the terms and conditions of the development of "follower religiousness" and its connection with phenomena of violence which - given the proportions - tend to increase rather than decrease. Such a thing is of course attempted outside of "methodological nationalisms" and absolutisms (Beck, 2008), such as that

of the Frankfurt School which considers sports in general as a field of development and diffusion of the dominant state ideology, power mechanisms and exploitative relations (Kotsiopoulos, 2017 p. 613). Observing, studying and recording the creative and qualitative coupling of elements of the Sociology of Sports with that of Religion, we come across the opinion that: "Sports (can) function as a sacred phenomenon" (Kotsiopoulos, 2017 p. 616). The idea of approaching or referring to sports or a special sports club, like a religious believer, seems that it can actually: "work strongly and contrary to other equally religious opposing sports aggregations" (Kotsiopoulos, 2017 p. 617).

#### 4. Conclusion

The phenomenon of hooliganism seems to have evolved and expanded beyond the stadiums. Now town squares, playgrounds, schools and streets have turned into confrontational battlegrounds between hot-blooded and violent fans (Karatrandos, 2022 p.3). Thus, sport appears to be: "instead of functioning in a unifying manner within the framework of international interdependence and World Peace, it functions within nationalistic contexts at the global level and divisive at the local national level" (Kotsiopoulos, 2017 p. 617). Football hooliganism can be also considered as a historical and developmental magnitude, a social phenomenon with specific social roots (Dunning, 2000).

The despair of poverty and uncertainty about the future (Denaxas, 2021), along with a lack of prospects, appear to be timeless factors capable of leading people—especially the youth—to adopt violent models, perceptions, and overall behavior. The sense of social injustice felt by the average fan of an admittedly 'popular sport' like football is often translated into violent outbursts (ranging from verbal abuse and destruction of public and private property to homicide). Violence seems to be a way for an individual to assert their presence and to transcend the margins to which social conditions have condemned them. Violence and brutality are of course antisocial elements and also main characteristics of the "sports fan religiosity". It is also worth noting that blasphemy—the insult of the divine—can be regarded as antisocial behavior, as it constitutes a verbal assault on religious symbols and beliefs that demonstrably compose a people's traditional cultural and national identity. Furthermore, it is a common practice among hooligans in their attempt to provoke opponents and create a climate of tension both inside and outside the stadium. It is indicative that, based on the Canon Law of the Orthodox Christian Church and the proceedings of the Ecumenical Councils, 'blasphemy' (under certain conditions) can even be considered a crime (Giannakopoulou E., 2013) In order to eliminate this irrational "sports fan fundamentalism", traditional spirituality and religiousness can show the way to a peaceful social standard. Sports fans can keep their cultural identity and be proud of their football clubs, without trying to prove themselves through violent acts, within the postmodern arena of contemporary culture and subculture wars. The real "fair play" can be consolidated by respecting the opponent and enjoying a real good game, no matter who actually wins. Thus, instead of bringing social tension and diffuse violence, sports fans can indeed contribute to ensuring social cohesion and peace.

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## Notes

Note 1. Edited presentation at the 18<sup>th</sup> International Conference, “Language, Individual and Society” (Burgas, Bulgaria 20-23/8/2024), organized by Science and Education Foundation and Sapporo University.

Note 2. A. Nikolaidis, *Concise Sociology* (in Greek), Grigoris Publishing, Athens 2008, p. 21.

Note 3. The late Archbishop of the Greek Orthodox Church Christodoulos, seems to have suggested Saint Nestor to veteran footballers, as the patron Saint of coaches and footballers but also of athletes in general, following a corresponding request from the Panhellenic Association of Veteran Football Players, in 2000. ‘Saint Nestor: patron Saint of football athletes’ (in Greek), *in.gr* (last accessed 22/11/2024).

Note 4. From the Apolytikion of Saint Nestor: “*As friend and companion of Demetrios thou wast an invincible athlete of godliness. By divine help thou didst conquer Lyaios and in being slain became a holy sacrifice to*

*Christ'*. (in Greek) «*Ἀθλητῆς εὐσεβείας ἀκαταγώνιστος, ὡς κοινωνὸς καὶ συνήθης τοῦ Δημητρίου ὀφθεῖς, ἠγωνίσω ἀνδρικῶς Νέστωρ μακάριε, τῆ θεϊκῆ γὰρ ἀρωγῇ, τὸν Λυαῖον καθελὼν, ὡς ἄμωμον ἱερεῖον, σφαγιασθεὶς προσηνέχθης, τῷ Ἀθλοθέτῃ καὶ Θεῷ ἡμῶν*».

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