

# Is the comparison of sport to religion justified?

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## Summary

The aim of this paper is to point out certain reasons for which some scholars perceive modern sport as a phenomenon that is significantly similar to or (in stronger variants) identical to religion. Referring to the distinction between substantive and functional definitions of religion, I would like to show that this approach is based on the latter and, as such, is burdened with some serious flaws. In criticizing functional definitions of religion I argue for a standpoint that comprises elements of the substantive as well as the functional perspective. In order to illustrate the heuristic merit of this approach, I refer to the analysis which has been put forward by a French anthropologist, Christian Bromberger. Drawing on the conclusions of his studies, I attempt to show that the substantive-functional perspective (a) enables a more detailed description of both sport and religion, which, apart from the similarities, brings out significant differences between them, and (b) helps to understand some features of modern Western societies.

**Keywords:** Harry Edwards, Charles Prebish, Christian Bromberger, religion, sport, modernity

## Introduction

Sport is compared to religion in both academic discourse and broader public spheres. In newspapers, interviews, television programs and sports comments, people often come across the following slogans: “sport is the new religion”, “football is not a sport but a religion”, “football is a modern religion”, etc. One of the historical sources of this perception of sport through the prism of religion can be found in the work of Pierre de Coubertin, who often pointed to the religious dimension of Olympism and sport. For example, in *Address from Olympia to the Youth of the World* from 1927, Coubertin urges future Olympians to become “new adepts of the religion of sports” and expresses the hope that Olympism will be a “school of moral nobility and purity as well as of physical endurance and energy” (2014, p. 87).

However, Coubertin’s concept of the religion of sport is far from unambiguous. In an article entitled *The religio athletae, Olympism and peace*, Jim Parry (2007, pp. 206, 210) warns against identifying the meaning of this concept with what we understand by traditional religion. In his opinion, Coubertin’s religion of sport cannot be seen as an alternative to traditional faith. Although some statements by this French baron may suggest that sport is a modern religion, in others he strongly distances himself from identifying sport or Olympism with religion<sup>1</sup>.

Should we therefore agree to a completely secular interpretation of the concept of the religion of sport? This view – as Parry argues – is also not correct. In his opinion, Coubertin, using the term religion of sport, pointed to the importance of “religious sentiment” for Olympism. In this approach, religiousness therefore means the symbolic, ritual, emotional and moral dimension of sport related to the values of equality, peace and pursuit of perfection (Parry, 2007, p. 210). It should be emphasized that according to Coubertin sport is not a religion in the traditional sense of the word; however, some of its features enable it to be perceived as phenomenon of a “spiritual” (Parry, 2007)<sup>1</sup> or “quasi-religious” (Zowislo, 2001, p. 110) nature.

## Sport as a quasi-religion

More systematic analyses which discuss the similarities between sport and religion appeared in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; of particular interest are the considerations of the American sociologist Harry Edwards that are presented in his book *Sociology of Sport* (1973). Edwards begins his analysis by highlighting the soaring popularity of sport in the United States in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He observes that sport has become more popular than politics, and there is a sim-

<sup>1</sup> This is noticeable when Coubertin emphasizes that the term *religiosus* is used by him in a way not fully analogous to its conventional usage (see Coubertin, 1966, p. 17).

<sup>2</sup> Parry (2007) interprets Coubertin’s idea of Olympism as a “spiritual movement”, which promotes “moral commitment and communal seriousness of purpose in the significant effort to achieve human excellence” (p. 210). In a very similar way Coubertin’s notion of *religio athletae* is interpreted by Jirásek (2005, pp. 290-299).

ilar level of interest in major sporting events and presidential elections. Given the very high level of religiosity in the United States, Edwards (1973) states that “For the American fan [...] sport [...] has achieved a stature not wholly unlike that enjoyed by traditional religions” (p. 260).

So which features do sport and religion share? Before discussing the answer given by Edwards to this question, I would like to make one point about religion. A number of scholars indicate that religious phenomena should be considered on several levels, therefore it is argued that religion is usually characterized by certain aspects or dimensions. The following aspects can be distinguished: (a) the doctrinal aspect – the doctrine which is the subject of religious faith; (b) the organizational aspect – religion as an organization that unites the faithful; (c) the practical-symbolic aspect – religious practice, places of worship, religious symbols that manifest religious affiliation; (d) the existential aspect – religious experience, religion as a source of meaning in the life of an individual; (f) religious authorities – priests, prophets, saints, exegetes, hierarchs. Edwards approaches the phenomenon of sport in a similar way and distinguishes those features which are attributed to religion. Sport, like religion, has doctrinal, organizational, practical-symbolic and existential aspects, and others related to authority<sup>3</sup>.

Thus sport, as Edwards (1973, p. 261) notices, has its “gods”<sup>4</sup> – charismatic, very talented athletes who are adored by people around the world. In the world of sport, we also find “believers” – fans who support their team or favorite athlete. The degree of involvement in the affairs of one’s favorite club can be very high and lead, as in the case of religion, to fanaticism. Edwards emphasizes the meaning-giving nature of this feature of sport – being a fan or an athlete gives life deeper purpose and direction<sup>5</sup>.

Another feature that is common for sport and religion is that both of these phenomena have, as Edwards (1973) puts it, “ruling patriarchs” (p. 261). These are the people who occupy high positions in the hierarchy of sports institutions; they usually enjoy great authority, prestige, power and influence. The existence of patriarchs is closely related to the existence of the institutions over which they preside. The objective of such organizations is – as Edwards (1973) says – “to make and interpret the rules of sports involvement” (p. 261).

Just as religion has temples where believers gather, so does sport. In this case, the places of worship are stadiums, halls and other sports facilities where followers meet to support their favorite team or athlete. Sport also has its own “shrines” (e.g. national halls of fame), which are places that are considered to be particularly “sacred”

and therefore become the destination of numerous “pilgrimages” (Edwards, 1973, p. 262).

As for the symbolic dimension of sport, Edwards first points to material objects such as medals, trophies and team emblems, which in the eyes of people associated with the world of sport have extremely high intangible value. Secondly, he draws attention to the ritual dimension of sport that makes human life meaningful. As Edwards (1973) puts it, “Sport involves »feeling«, ritual and the celebration of human achievement. It provides fans with a set of organized principles which give meaning to their secular strivings and sufferings” (p. 262).

Finally, in the case of sport one can also talk about the doctrinal aspect in the form of “dogmas”. In my opinion, this is one of the most interesting threads of Edwards’s considerations, so I will discuss it in more detail. Edwards claims that sport, like religion, has dogmas, i.e. statements that are believed to be true under a certain authority and the legitimacy of which is therefore also rarely questioned. These dogmas point to some features of sport thanks to which it is surrounded by reverential respect. According to Edwards (1973), the functioning of sport in society, its acceptance, and the legitimacy of practices related to it are based on a “body of formally stated beliefs, accepted on faith by great masses of people” (p. 261).

Analyzing various sources regarding the social perception of sport, including scientific journals, press materials, articles, interviews, biographies of athletes, legal documents, etc., Edwards extracts a set of beliefs which he describes as “the dominant American sport creeds” (1973, p. 71). He gives the following examples of social imaginaries concerning sport: “Sports participation develops »good character«, “Sports participation generates a value on social and/or self-control”, “Sports participation prepares athletes for life” (Edwards, 1973, pp. 317–332). The striking feature of these beliefs is their ideological nature. Unlike scientific inquiry, their goal is not to provide an impartial and objective description of a given phenomenon; it is to evoke a specific type of response and strengthen certain attitudes towards sport (Edwards, 1973, p. 72-73). These beliefs offer an emotionally marked vision of sport and thus aim to consolidate a stance which affirms the institution of sport.

The ideological nature of “sport creeds” means that the beliefs which form them are to a great extent “selective”. Thus, proponents of these beliefs focus only on certain facts and examples which confirm them, while ignoring or diminishing those which are contradictory. Edwards (1973) claims that the acceptance of “sport creeds” is not a derivative of the analysis of various facts or arguments but is instead based on “faith” (p. 80). We

<sup>3</sup> An analogous approach is present in Zbigniew Pasek’s (2012, p. 106) considerations. Referring to Ninian Smart, a religious studies scholar, he distinguishes seven dimensions of religion (doctrinal, mythological, ethical, ritual, experiential, institutional, material), and then analyzes football in this respect on the example of the Cracovia club in Krakow.

<sup>4</sup> I limit myself to mentioning only some of the features discussed by Edwards. The order in which I cite them has also been changed.

<sup>5</sup> On the analysis of the social and psychological aspects of the phenomenon of fandom, see D.L. Wann, M.J. Melznick, G.W. Russell, D.G. Pease (2001).

can say that this is a kind of “wishful thinking” by which we recognize something as the truth because we want it to be true. In order to justify their view, proponents of the belief that “sport prepares for life” will cite examples of athletes who have achieved success in some other areas of human activity after the end of their sporting career. At the same time, they will ignore or undermine the importance of opposing examples – the numerous cases of former athletes who are addicted to alcohol or drugs, have problems with the law, or are socially dysfunctional.

One of the most important issues discussed by Edwards concerns the question of the persuasive power of “sport dogmas”, whose evocative nature has two sources in his opinion: firstly, these statements are very general in their form; secondly and most importantly, the persuasive power of sport dogmas results from the fact that they relate substantially to the tradition and heritage of the culture in which they operate, otherwise they would appear to be incomprehensible and would thus have no chance of gaining broad acceptance. By referring to the values and cultural resources of American society, these “dogmas” not only legitimize sport as a social institution but also confirm the validity and significance of the ideals that constitute the identity of American culture (Edwards, 1973, pp. 333-347).

The belief in the superior value of hard work, discipline, renunciation, dedication, and the conviction that success is a merit is one of the pillars of American society. At the root of the American ideology of sport that was studied by Edwards is the conviction (which is fundamental to this society) in the value of individual success achieved through hard work. According to Edwards (1973), this belief and the values associated with it determine the spirit of American sport, which can be described as “achievement orientation” (p. 334)<sup>6</sup>.

Thus, how does Edwards view sport in relation to religion? In this regard, he gives two answers which appear to be conflicting at first glance. On one hand, he writes that “If there is a universal popular religion in America it is to be found within the institution of sport” (Edwards, 1973, p. 90). On the other hand, he defines sport as a “quasi-religious institution”, which – as it should be emphasized – “does not [...] constitute an alternative to or substitute for formal sacred religious involvement” (Edwards, 1973, p. 90). When Edwards refers to sport as a universal American religion, he does not mean traditional religion. As I understand, he indicates that the huge interest in sport and the fact that it is rooted in collective values mean that it can be seen as a form of “civil religion”<sup>7</sup>. From this perspective the religion of sport and traditional religion are not mutually

exclusive as these two types of commitment can overlap and form a generally complementary arrangement (Edwards, 1973, p. 90).

## Sport as a religion

In an article entitled “*Heavenly Father, Divine Goalie*”: *Sport and Religion*, Charles Prebish (1984, pp. 306–318) cites with appreciation the similarities described by Edwards between sport and religion. At the same time, he criticizes Edwards for inconsistency as he did not articulate the obvious fact that comparing sport to religion reveals not so much the convergence or analogy of these phenomena but their identity. As he writes:

For me, it is not just a parallel that is emerging between sport and religion, but rather a *complete identity*. Sport is religion for growing numbers of Americans, and this is no product of simply facile reasoning or wishful thinking. Further, for many, sport religion has become a more appropriate expression of personal religiosity than Christianity, Judaism, or any of the traditional religions. (Prebish, 1984, p. 312)

While for Edwards sport as a form of universal American religion is not an alternative to traditional religions, for Prebish the opposite is true. By placing “sport religion” on the same footing as traditional religion, he argues that one cannot profess both at the same time. So, why do many people who are genuinely involved in sport describe themselves as Catholics, Protestants, Muslims etc.? According to Prebish (1984, p. 318) this is not because they are truly concerned with religious tradition, i.e. Protestantism, but rather because of the pressure they feel due to non-religious and socio-cultural factors.

What are the reasons behind Prebish’s standpoint? He observes that religious and sporting rituals have the same effect on their participants: they can “resacralize” the everyday humdrum and thus provide meaning to their lives. This is because rituals, whether religious or related to sports, lead to transcending the boundaries of one’s own self, and this in turn opens us up to “the possibility of experiencing a different, non-ordinary reality” (Prebish, 1984, p. 314). The question that arises within this context is how Prebish understands religion. He adopts the definition of religion according to which it constitutes “a means of ultimate transformation” (Prebish, 1984, p. 316). Sport should therefore be identified with religion because it enables personal reinvention as a result of “experiencing ultimacy”. The important thing

<sup>6</sup> This kind of attitude is nowadays perceived as the source of various malaises of sport. For a discussion of this issue, see N.J. Watson, J. White (2007, pp. 61-67).

<sup>7</sup> The concept of civil religion comes from Jean Jacques Rousseau, who discussed it in *The Social Contract* (1762/1968). In the twentieth century, the concept of civil religion was developed by Robert Bellah (1967), who used this category to describe some features of American society. Within this context, religion mainly serves to maintain and legitimize social order. Although Edwards does not use this term, to the institution of sport he ascribes the qualities that define civil religion.

here is that the concept of “the ultimate” does not have – as opposed to traditional religions – a specific meaning but is always determined in relation to a specific person. An example of the “experience of the ultimate” that Prebish (1984) gives is the feeling of “oneness with nature” (p. 317). Prebish does not go into the details of what life transformation means, he merely observes that it is multidimensional and concerns “attitudes, values, frames of reference, interpersonal relationships, and social involvements” (1984, p. 318). Bearing this last element in mind, Prebish emphasizes that sport could not be a religion if the beneficiary of the personal transformation it offers were not the whole of society. Thus, the individual experience that takes place in the context of the religion of sport reciprocally supports the functioning of society (Prebish, 1984, p. 316).

## Functional approach to religion

Now I would like to critically assess Edwards’ considerations and Prebish’s standpoint, which was inspired by them. I believe that they are based on a functional approach to religion and thus they are exposed to the criticisms of supporters of the substantive understanding of religion.

The functional approach focuses on “what religion *does*”, namely what functions it performs in relation to individuals and societies (Davie, 2007, pp. 19–21; Dobbelaere, 2004, pp. 49–55; Robertson, 1970, pp. 36–41). When it comes to the human psyche, a typical feature of religion is that it answers fundamental questions about the meaning of life. As for society, an important function of religion is to integrate people and connect them into a collective entity. One of the first representatives of the functional approach to religion was Émile Durkheim, whose proposed definition of religion is as follows: “A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single community called a Church, all those who adhere to them” (Durkheim, 1995, p. 44). Despite the presence of a substantial element (separation of the sacred and the profane), this definition is functional. In Durkheim’s view, as Włodzimierz Pawluczuk (2000) notes, “holiness is reduced to what is social” (p. 288). The privileged nature of the *sacrum* is not determined by its content but by the function it performs. This function consists in the fact that it is integrative; it is a social binder that cements the community. Thanks to religion, society consolidates its foundations (Davie, 2007, p. 30–31).

This approach allows Durkheim to look for functional equivalents of traditional religion in modern societies, i.e. phenomena that replace traditional religious systems in playing an integrative role. National assemblies are an example of new forms of *sacrum* manifestations that replace the “old gods” and take on integrative functions. As Durkheim (1995) rhetorically puts it, “What basic difference is there between Christians celebrating the

principal dates of Christ’s life [...] and a citizens’ meeting commemorating the advent of a new moral charter or some other great event of national life?” (p. 429).

Referring to Edwards’s considerations, I think that his take on sport as a phenomenon of a “religious” or “quasi-religious” nature results from the functional perspective at the root of his arguments. Just as Durkheim’s religion has a mainly integrative function, the same can be said about Edwards’s sport. This is clearly evident in his statement:

by infusing exceptional, but “intrinsically” neutral, physical activity with socially significant values, societies reinforce prevalent sentiment regarding acceptable perspectives and behavior. They thus establish avenues of communicating to the populace those values focusing upon solutions to critical problems, most notably those involving needs for *societal integration* [emphasis, D.B.]. (Edwards, 1973, p. 89)

Grace Davie (2007) notes that according to Durkheim “religion is nothing more than the symbolic expression of social experience” (p. 30–31). Can a similar approach to sport be found in Edwards analysis? I believe so. This can be seen, for example, in his perception of sport as “popular religion”, or when he states that “an attack upon sport is an attack upon the society itself” (Edwards, 1973, p. 90).

Based on the analysis by Edwards, it can be said that society itself and its important values underlie the popularity of sport, the adoration shown for athletes, and the intense emotions that accompany great sporting events. Inasmuch as sport strengthens the sense of communal belonging, it constitutes “civil religion”. Commenting on the concept of sport as a “civil religion”, Radosław Kossakowski (2017) notes that it emphasizes the “bond-forming nature” of sporting events. As he writes, “with the help of games, anthems, national colors and »a collective soul« – members of modern societies glorify a nation, its myths and greatness” (Kossakowski, 2017).

The functional approach is also present in Prebish’s standpoint. I agree with Gregg Twietmeyer (2015) here, who notes that “According to the functionalists, religion is not about content, but rather about commitment(s). That which holds our ultimate allegiance is our religion. It is from this point of view that some scholars have argued that »sport is the modern religion«” (p. 241). What is sacred is therefore determined by our commitment. By treating certain areas of life as the most important or ultimate, we define their nature as religious or sacred. From the point of view of the functional understanding of religion, in addition to sport, nationalism, humanism, capitalism, scientism, etc. may also be regarded as religion.

Prebish’s standpoint should be seen from this perspective. His conception of religion as a way of achieving personal transformation leaves aside the specific content of religious beliefs and is purely functional. Whether a phenomenon is a religion or not is determined by

the function it performs or the result to which it leads rather than by the content of the beliefs of its followers. Sport is a religion because in relation to the human psyche it plays the same role – it gives deeper meaning to human life and allows the ultimate to be experienced. As has been already stated about Prebish's considerations, the notion of the ultimate has no definite meaning and depends on what the individual understands by it. On this view, therefore, some "sports experiences"<sup>8</sup> as well as values associated with various secular ideologies can be considered religious.

Although Prebish focuses on the existential dimension of religion, in his considerations the social aspect is also noticeable, which is in accordance with Edwards's approach. As Prebish (1984) puts it, "The results of ultimate transformation through sport must be *socially functional* [emphasis D.B.] in a way that is consistent with sport and the ethical imperative that derives from its practice" (p. 316).

## Substantive approach to religion and criticism of functionalism

The functional approach to religion is criticized by supporters of the substantive view, who mainly pay attention to "what religion *is*" (Davie, 2007, p. 19). In this case, the content of beliefs or the object of faith are decisive in determining religion. Proponents of the substantive approach try to isolate the constitutive elements of religion which account for its specificity. In their view, what determines the nature of religion and at the same time distinguishes it from other spheres of culture is belief in the existence of supernatural or transcendent beings, i.e. those that transcend the domain of natural phenomena. Max Weber is considered a supporter of the substantive approach to religion. Although he did not provide a definition of religion, in his research – as Davie (2007) notes – Weber drew attention primarily to "the content (or substance) of a particular religion" (p. 29). A very important tradition in this context is the 20<sup>th</sup>-century phenomenology of religion, whose representatives (Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade) sought to grasp the essence of the religious phenomenon. Therefore, these authors advocated an idiogenetic understanding of religion and thus defended its autonomy and irreducibility to other areas of culture.

In contemporary times the substantive approach to religion can be found, for instance, in the work of Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (2007) and the Scottish sociologist Steve Bruce (2002). Bruce understands religion as "beliefs, actions and institutions predicated on the existence of entities with powers of agency (that is, gods) or impersonal powers or processes possessed of moral purpose [...] which can set the conditions of, or intervene in, human affairs" (2002, p. 2).

The main flaw of functional definitions is their excessive inclusiveness (Davie, 2007, p. 20; Dobbelaere, 2004, p. 50), which undermines their theoretical value. If we consider that providing individuals with a system of morals and societies with an integrative framework is a defining feature of religion, then all social phenomena performing such functions must be considered religious. Thus, if we expect the definitions to order and separate certain spheres of reality or explain the conventional understanding of certain phenomena, then the functional approach to religion turns out to be too broad. Here I agree with Bruce (2011), who notes that functionalism "obscures more than it illuminates" (p. 110). In this regard, as Bruce (2011) writes:

Defining football as a religion discourages a detailed consideration of the differences between sport and religion and achieves by fiat what should be established by empirical demonstration. Broadening the notion of religion to include anything that shares any of its features runs counter to the one of the key purposes of definition, which is to isolate the distinctive features of phenomena. (p. 110)

Roland Robertson (1970, p. 41) and Karl Dobbelaere (2004, p. 50) criticize the functional definition advocates for their inconsistency, which lies in introducing – most frequently implicitly – certain elements of substantive nature into their considerations. Robertson (1970, p. 40) notes that on a general level Robert Bellah advocates the functional definition, which allows him to develop the concept of "civil religion". On the other hand, in the face of more specific issues Bellah is forced to assume the substantive approach to religion.

Finally, relying on an inclusive understanding of religion means that we are unable to acknowledge the individual secularization process of many modern societies, which involves substituting traditional religion with a nonreligious worldview. Although US society is an exception in this respect, many researchers claim that the secularization of Western Europe constitutes a social fact (Davie, 2007, p. 44; Dobbelaere, 2004, p. 140; Norris, Inglehart 2011). If every phenomenon (e.g. sport, humanism, nationalism) that provides an individual with a meaning system is religious by definition, then one cannot really talk about secularization of Western societies (Robertson, 1970, p. 39).

Apparently, the substantive approach is not free of reservations. The main objection which is formulated against it is that defining religion by means of the supernatural realm is ethnocentric: it only comprises some forms of religion that are characteristic of Western culture and excludes others not related to it. This objection is apt if our aim is to present a definition of religion that is universally valid. However, if we limit research to a specific culture – in our case Western culture – this reservation must be weakened.

<sup>8</sup> For an in-depth analysis showing differences between sporting experience and religious experience, see H. Machoń (2012, pp. 93–115).

## Sport and religion: similarities and differences

The objections against functional definitions which have been presented here are not intended to completely reject functionalism. The substantive approach, as Dobbe-laere (2004, p. 52) notes, does not have to exclude the functional perspective. In this regard I do not agree with Davie (2007), who describes the approach that combines substantive elements with functional ones as an attempt to “square the circle” (p. 20). In trying to identify the specificity of a given phenomenon, one can also analyze its functions. Thus, I agree that sport can be an important element of both individual and collective identity, and it may perform an integrative role; however, this does not mean that it can be considered a religion. General similarities cannot obscure significant differences.

An excellent illustration of the standpoint presented here can be found in the studies by the French anthropologist Christian Bromberger (1995, pp. 293–311). The basis of Bromberger’s analysis is the research on the emotional and ritual dimension of collective attitudes towards football that he and his collaborators conducted in Marseille, Naples and Turin (Bromberger, Hayot, Mariottini, 1995)<sup>9</sup>. Trying to point to the sources of the widespread fascination with sport, Bromberger rejects the revisionist approach, according to which sport is “the opium of the people” (Harris, 1981). In a manner reminiscent of Edwards, he argues that the extremely high interest in sport is due to the fact that it is an expression of “the basic values underlying modern societies” (Bromberger, 1995, p. 296). Bromberger notes that during major sporting events society reveals its “definite image”, which contains elements that merge it as well as contradictions and ambiguities that tear it apart. Sport is therefore a manifestation of liberal-democratic values that are often in tension. On the one hand, they are individualistic values: freedom, hard work, success, competition. On the other, they are collective values: equality, cooperation and solidarity. In addition, football, through the tension between merit and chance that reflects the unpredictability of the result and the phenomenon of rapidly fading fame reveals an important feature of the condition of a modern individual that consists of a sense of uncertainty about its fate (Bromberger, 1995, p. 296).

Noting the analogy of sporting events and religion, Bromberger discusses the issue of their ritual dimension. Referring to Victor Turner’s (1991) considerations, he describes a ritual as “a powerful moment that gives meaning to existence through the necessary intermixing of operative and exegetical aspects pertaining to other dimensions” (Bromberger, 1995, p. 306). Bearing that in mind, Bromberger lists the features of rituals: “break with everyday routine”, “specific spatio-temporal framework”, “carefully programmed schedule of ceremonies recurring in a regular cycle”, “moral obligation to partic-

ipate”, etc. He focuses particularly on Turner’s concept of *communitas*, which points to the essentially collective aspect of ritual. In this approach, one of the main goals of rituals is to renew and consolidate a sense of communal belonging.

In this regard, Bromberger claims that sporting events are similar in many respects to religious rituals. Sports rituals, like religious ones, are based on “repetitive and codified modes of behavior”; they occur regularly in strictly defined places, allow one to forget about everyday life, and they have rich symbolism. In addition to equality (*communitas*), they also reflect a hierarchical arrangement that involves division into specific roles, and they contain elements of sacrifice and dramaturgy (Bromberger, 1995, pp. 306–308). However, the most valuable and inspiring aspect of Bromberger’s analysis is that it is not limited to demonstrating the similarities between sport and religion, but – by describing the differences between these phenomena – it seeks to capture the specificity of the sport ritual. The question is, what are the differences here?

First of all, the fundamental difference between a religious and sporting ritual is that the latter is not significantly based on belief in the existence of a supernatural reality (Bromberger, 1995, pp. 308–309). It can be said that if such a reference appears as part of modern sport, it is of contingent nature and, as such, does not constitute the specificity of a sporting event. Secondly, while religious rituals are characterized by a mood of solemnity, great sporting events are performances in which the “solemn run alongside the ridiculous; the tragic alternates with the comic, drama with parody, commitment with aloofness” (Bromberger, 1995, p. 310). These qualities partly explain why sports performances, unlike religious ceremonies, are greatly exciting. Thirdly, the motivation to participate in sporting events, apart from certain elements related to commitment (loyalty to a given team), is also associated with the need for entertainment and, as such, cannot be equated with a religious imperative to worship a higher being. The fourth difference results from the close relationship emphasized by Turner between the exegesis of the ritual and its meaning and form. In this sense, football is a “ritual with no »exege-sis«”. A sporting ritual is a “bricolage” of various symbolic forms that do not have at their basis a specific and canonical set of beliefs that determines their meaning (Bromberger, 1995, p. 310). Therefore, a sport ritual is hermeneutically indeterminate and is thus susceptible to multiple interpretations. This openness to various readings harmonizes with the pluralism of worldviews that defines modern societies.

Finally, sport rituals – in contrast to traditional rituals – are characterized by their “uniqueness” (its course, despite some fixed reference points, is always different), which also determines the popularity of sport. Henryk Machoń (2012) also draws attention to the connection between the “one-timeness” of sports experiences

<sup>9</sup> For a summary of the considerations included in the book, see Ch. Bromberger (1995, pp. 293–311).

and their attractiveness. He notes that the uniqueness of sporting events is strictly related to their dramaturgy and “gives the fan the impression of participating in something *special* which will never happen again as it will end within the limits of one sporting match” (Machoń, 2012, p. 99). This uniqueness is closely related to another characteristic of sport, namely the “instability” that is manifested in the changeability of collective moods regarding who is considered an “idol”. This is reflected in popular slogans that try to show the fate of an athlete: “from zero to hero” and “from hero to zero”. According to Bromberger (1995, p. 311), this uniqueness and instability not only point to the specificity of sporting rituals but also reveal a sense of uncertainty which essentially characterizes the modern subject.

Thus, Bromberger would agree that sports rituals, like religion, have a meaning-giving nature. However, he claims that sport, unlike religion, does not provide a narrative about “where we come from and where we are going” (Bromberger, 1995, p. 311). A similar conclusion was reached by Machoń (2012) who argues that one of the main differences between sport and religion concerns “cognitive content” (p. 111). Religion, unlike sport, as Machoń (2012) says, “attempts a holistic interpretation of reality. From the perspective of faith, it shows such truths as the beginning of the universe, the nature of God/deity, the way of (good) life [...], fate after death” (p. 111). In a somewhat similar vein, Danièle Hervieu-Léger (2000) notes that one of the characteristics of sport which manifests itself during large sporting events is preoccupation with what is happening “here and now”. She also adds that this feature of the sporting experience, goes in hand with modern “subjectivization of systems of meaning” (Hervieu-Léger, p. 103). Although sport, unlike religion, cannot offer sufficiently capacious frames that would connect the past with the future, the hermeneutic space created thanks to it is “deep enough” (Bromberger, 1995, p. 311) to show, at least partially, who we are. Such disclosure, however, is not of a purely integrative nature since it often implies intra-social polarization (“we”–“they”) based on social conflicts and divisions.

## Final remarks

In this article I have pointed to certain aspects of sport which in the opinion of some researchers make it a phenomenon similar or even identical to religion. The analogy of sport and religion is determined by the fact that they have the same role: they give meaning to human life, they are an important determinant of individual and collective identity, they preserve and reproduce community values, their ritual aspect satisfies the need to transcend daily routine, etc. However, – as I have tried to show – underlying this comparison is the functional understanding of religion, which is burdened with significant difficulties. One of the main disadvantages of the functional perspective is that it is too broad and includes

in the category of religion ideologies or worldviews that are essentially secular. Emphasizing the functional aspect of the phenomena under study neglects their substance and leads to an unjustified equation of sport and religion.

Therefore, are comparative analyses of sport and religion completely unjustified? Maria Zowisło (2016) notes that “Modern sport and its pulse in the form of the Olympic Games are cultural phenomena that are heuristically inspiring for the scholars interested in myths and rituals of secularized modernity” (p. 45). As I have attempted to demonstrate on the example of Bromberger’s analyses, the study of sport through the prism of religion not only can lead to an in-depth understanding of these phenomena but can also shed light on some aspects of modern Western societies. However, I believe that this requires a substantive-functional approach to religion in which the indication of the similarities between sport and religion is complemented by articulation and description of their significant differences.

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