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(2014) Working with religious and spiritual athletes: Ethical  
considerations for sport psychologists. *Psychology of Sport  
and Exercise*, 15 (6). pp. 580-587.  
[doi:10.1016/j.psychsport.2014.05.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2014.05.006)**

Official URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2014.05.006>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2014.05.006>

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/1198>

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This is a peer-reviewed, post-print (final draft post-refereeing) version of the following published document:

**Sarkar, Mustafa and Hill, Denise M. and Parker, Andrew (2014). *Working with religious and spiritual athletes: Ethical considerations for sport psychologists*. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 15 (6) 580-587. ISSN 14690292**

Published in *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, and available online at:

<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1469029214000740>

We recommend you cite the published (post-print) version.

The URL for the published version is <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2014.05.006>

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Working with Religious and Spiritual Athletes:  
Ethical Considerations for Sport Psychologists

Date of submission: January 2, 2014  
Date of revised submission: May 10, 2014  
Date of second revised submission: May 22, 2014



1                   Working with Religious and Spiritual Athletes:  
2                   Ethical Considerations for Sport Psychologists

3           Just before walking over [to the Olympic final], Coach pulled me aside and we prayed  
4           together as we had done since I was in college. I had heard other athletes ask God to  
5           let them win, which I thought was ridiculous. Coach, however, simply asked God to  
6           keep me healthy and, if it was His will, to allow me to run at my best. ‘God blessed  
7           me with his talent,’ I thought as the prayer ended. ‘His job is done, and it’s up to me  
8           and me alone to win this race (Johnson, 2011, p. 17).

9           Comments such as the above by Michael Johnson, four-time Olympic champion,  
10          highlight the importance of religious and spiritual beliefs for many sport performers. These  
11          beliefs are also reflected in the existence of organizations, such as The Fellowship of  
12          Christian Athletes, Muslim Women’s Sport Foundation, and the Centre for Sport and Jewish  
13          Life. In addition to such anecdotal observations, there is growing evidence in the sport  
14          psychology literature indicating the relevance of religious and spiritual values for a variety of  
15          elite athletes (e.g., Balague, 1999; Howe & Parker, 2014; Storch, Kolsky, Silvestri, & Storch,  
16          2001; Vernacchia, McGuire, Reardon, & Templin, 2000). In a study investigating the salient  
17          psychosocial characteristics of Olympic track and field athletes, Vernacchia et al. (2000)  
18          found that religious and spiritual factors often played an important part in the athletes’ sport  
19          careers. Specifically, these beliefs helped athletes react positively to occurrences such as  
20          injury and personal problems, and provided a deep meaning to their successes and failures.

21          Although a number of prominent psychology scholars, such as William James, Carl  
22          Jung, and Gordon Allport, were keenly interested in the relationship between psychology,  
23          religion, and spirituality (e.g., Allport, 1950; James, 1890, 1902; Jung, 1938), most  
24          professional and scientific psychologists during the past century has avoided the connection  
25          between these areas of inquiry (Plante, 2007). The recognition of religion and spirituality as

1 topics requiring psychological attention has emerged predominantly towards the latter end of  
2 the 20th century in line with the focus towards positive psychology (Lopez & Snyder, 2003).  
3 The aim of this paradigm shift has been “to ...catalyze a change in the focus of psychology  
4 from preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive  
5 qualities” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). Accordingly, this movement has  
6 embraced religion and spirituality and has used rigorous scientific methods, such as double-  
7 blind randomized controlled trials, to examine the influence of such factors on health and  
8 well-being (Miller & Thoresen, 2003). For example, within the general psychology literature,  
9 it has been found that religion and spirituality may protect individuals from the stressors that  
10 they encounter, that is, they can provide people with greater psychological resilience in the  
11 face of negative life events (e.g., Peres, Moreira-Almeida, Nasello & Koenig, 2007). Given  
12 that religion and spirituality are important for the welfare of numerous individuals, it is  
13 perhaps somewhat surprising that there are relatively few studies within the sport psychology  
14 literature that directly examine the association between religion, spirituality, and well-being  
15 in sport performers. In one such study, Storch et al. (2003) found that internal commitment to  
16 personal religious and spiritual beliefs was inversely associated with substance use in  
17 intercollegiate athletes. However, due to the correlational nature of the data, the authors could  
18 only speculate that some athletes may have turned to their religious and spiritual values to  
19 cope with a variety of stressors, such as injury and academic hardship.

20         Although work in this area is not as extensive in the field of sport psychology as it is  
21 in the general psychology literature, research exploring the experiences of ultra-marathoners  
22 (Acevedo, Dzewaltowski, Gill, & Noble, 1992), college athletes (Dillon & Tait, 2000; Storch  
23 et al., 2001, 2003), Olympians (Vernacchia et al., 2000), and Paralympians (Howe & Parker,  
24 2014) has highlighted the importance of religion and spirituality in the lives of a wide variety  
25 of athletes. These beliefs have become commonplace in the world of sport, with many

1 athletes utilizing religious and spiritual practices, especially prayer, as a coping mechanism  
2 and performance enhancement technique (see, e.g., Czech & Bullet, 2007; Maranise, 2013;  
3 Park, 2000; Watson & Czech, 2005). A number of applied sport psychologists have also  
4 emphasized the importance of the religious and spiritual dimension when working with  
5 athletes (e.g., Balague, 1999; Gamble, Hill, & Parker, 2013; Ravizza, 2002; Watson & Czech,  
6 2005; Watson & Nesti, 2005). In a review of the role of religion and spirituality in sport  
7 psychology consulting, Watson and Nesti (2005) addressed four main issues: (a) reconciling  
8 religion and spirituality into current athlete-centered models; (b) integrating religion and  
9 spirituality into mental skills training; (c) the relationship between religion, spirituality, and  
10 positive psychological states, such as flow and peak experiences; and (d) the utility of  
11 religion and spirituality in sport psychology counselling. More recently, Gamble et al. (2013)  
12 explored the role and impact of sport psychologists and sport chaplains within a selection of  
13 English Premiership soccer clubs. They found that sport psychologists predominantly focused  
14 on performance enhancement whereas the sport chaplains primarily offered spiritual care,  
15 with both contributing to the pastoral needs of players. The impact of both disciplines within  
16 Premiership soccer remained restricted due to a number of barriers. Interestingly, to achieve  
17 greater impact within this context, Gamble et al. suggested that “future research is warranted  
18 to explore the potential of a collaborative partnership between the sport psychologist and  
19 chaplain, and how they could work more effectively with significant others (i.e., coaches and  
20 managers) to provide support to their athletes” (p. 261).

21         Although further work is required before religion and spirituality is integrated into  
22 service delivery (Crust, 2006), sport psychologists clearly need to be aware of the associated  
23 values and beliefs of athletes. Drawing on 25 years of practitioner experience with elite sport  
24 performers, Balague (1999) stated that “spirituality or religion is often a big part of many  
25 athletes’ lives” (p. 91) and asserted that if sport psychology interventions do not consider

1 athletes' religious and spiritual worldviews "...the likely outcome is not only that the  
2 intervention will not work, but that we lose the trust of athletes by showing that we do not  
3 understand something that is at the core of their identities and values" (p. 92). To illustrate,  
4 Balague suggested that some forms of positive self-talk may not be appropriate for religious  
5 and spiritual athletes since it may sound like bragging and conflict with principles of humility.

6         Moreover, during the last decade or two, there has been an increased awareness of  
7 cultural diversity in sport and calls for culturally informed sport psychology research and  
8 practice (e.g., Hanrahan, 2010, 2011; Ryba, Stambulova, Si, & Schinke, 2013; Schinke &  
9 Hanrahan, 2009; Schinke & Moore, 2011; Stambulova & Ryba, 2014). At the heart of this  
10 emerging area of cultural sport psychology (CSP) is the notion of cultural praxis. Cultural  
11 praxis, introduced in sport psychology by Ryba and Wright (2005, 2010), is "a critical  
12 discourse" and "an attempt to broaden the epistemological spectrum of theory and practice in  
13 the field" (2010, p. 3). This approach challenges culture-blind theories, research, and practice,  
14 and moves the sport psychology field from decontextualized knowledge to a new way of  
15 thinking about athletes as constituted by various discourses and identities (Ryba et al., 2013).  
16 A number of sport psychology researchers have put forward various ethical considerations in  
17 relation to culture and diversity, particularly religion and spirituality. These include:  
18 multicultural competence (Ryba et al., 2013), training and education (Watson & Nesti, 2005),  
19 referral systems (Andersen, Van Raalte, & Brewer, 2001), and professional boundaries  
20 (Watson & Czech, 2005). Despite acknowledging these ethical issues, over the last decade,  
21 when working with athletes of religious and spiritual persuasion, scholars have yet to  
22 systematically explore this pertinent area of enquiry. This is in contrast to other fields of  
23 psychology, especially psychotherapy, which have countless texts and articles dedicated to  
24 ethical considerations when working with such clients (see, e.g., Barnett & Johnson, 2011;  
25 Gonsiorek, Richards, Pargament, & McMinn, 2009; Plante, 2007; Yarhouse & VanOrman,

1 1999).

2 Plante (2007) employed the RRICC model to highlight ethical issues with religion,  
3 spirituality, and psychotherapy integration, an approach that is readily applicable to ethical  
4 codes across the world. It was developed to highlight the primary values supported in all  
5 ethics codes associated with various mental health professions in the United States and  
6 abroad (Plante, 2004). RRICC stands for the values of respect, responsibility, integrity,  
7 competence, and concern, with the model acting as an easy-to-use framework to highlight the  
8 values outlined in the British Psychological Society's (BPS, 2009) *Code of Ethics and*  
9 *Conduct* (hereinafter referred to as *Ethics Code*). Using the components of the RRICC as a  
10 framework for discussion, and through the lens of cultural praxis, the purpose of this article is  
11 to explore the ethical issues arising when working with athletes who profess religious and  
12 spiritual allegiance. In view of our country of residence and due to the similarity in ethical  
13 principles to the RRICC model, the focus on the psychologist's code from BPS's (2009)  
14 *Ethics Code* will be used as a point of reference.

### 15 **Definitions**

16 Although the terms religion and spirituality have often been used interchangeably,  
17 researchers have attempted to define both constructs (e.g., Hill et al., 2000; Hill & Pargament,  
18 2008; Hyman & Handal, 2006). Hyman and Handal (2006) explored the concepts of religion  
19 and spirituality by asking religious professionals (Catholic priests, Protestant ministers,  
20 Islamic imams, and Jewish rabbis) to define the two terms. To summarize these findings,  
21 religion was considered to be something which is concerned with external and objective  
22 organizational practices about a higher power that one performs in a group setting, whereas  
23 spirituality was defined as internal, subjective, and divine experience. Hill et al. (2000)  
24 defined spirituality as "the feelings, thoughts, experiences, and behaviours that arise from a  
25 search for the sacred" (p. 66). According to Hill et al. (2000), religion may also include a

1 search for non-sacred goals (e.g., identity, belongingness, or wellness) with the sacred search  
2 process receiving validation and support from an identifiable group of people. As such,  
3 religion is often viewed as occurring within a formally structured religious institution such as  
4 a church, synagogue, or mosque, whereas spirituality is often characterized by more  
5 experiential dynamics associated with personal meaning (Hill et al., 2000; Hill & Pargament,  
6 2008). The scope of the present article prevents us from fully examining and elaborating on  
7 the varied definitions of these two terms. Thus, and in line with the broader special issue, we  
8 take a more overarching approach by describing issues of religion and spirituality collectively  
9 to facilitate a wide range of interpretations.

### 10 **Using the RRICC Model to Highlight Ethical Issues When Working with Religious and** 11 **Spiritual Athletes**

12 When Plante (2007) used the RRICC approach, he explored in turn the principles of  
13 respect, responsibility, integrity, competence, and concern to highlight the ethical issues  
14 requiring consideration with religion, spirituality, and psychotherapy integration. Specifically,  
15 he noted that psychologists needed to: (a) *respect* the beliefs and values associated with  
16 religion and spirituality, (b) have a *responsibility* to be aware and thoughtful of how religion  
17 and spirituality impacts others, (c) act with *integrity* in terms of being honest about their skills  
18 as professionals, (d) provide *competent* professional services by integrating religion and  
19 spirituality into their professional psychology work, and (e) show *concern* for the wellbeing  
20 and welfare of others. Plante continued by identifying and discussing four ethical dilemmas  
21 relating to the issues of respect (viz. religious and spiritual bias), integrity (viz. blurred  
22 boundaries and dual relationships), competence (viz. assuming expertise in a faith tradition),  
23 and concern (viz. destructive religious beliefs and behaviors). In the following section, we  
24 will explore the application of the RRICC model, through the lens of cultural praxis, when  
25 working with religious and spiritual athletes.

## 1 **Respect**

2           The *Ethics Code* states that “psychologists should respect individual, cultural and role  
3 differences, including...religion” (p. 10). One of the main tensions in fulfilling this principle  
4 involves the issue of informed consent, an area that has had relatively little formal  
5 examination within the sport psychology literature (cf. Moore, 2003). As Fisher and Oransky  
6 (2008) stated, informed consent is integral to the formation of the service delivery  
7 relationship and is best conceptualized not as a singular event but as an ongoing process. This  
8 collaborative practice should provide athletes with information that they would generally find  
9 relevant to deciding if they want to participate in the professional relationship. In the context  
10 of the present discussion, informed consent would help athletes of religious and spiritual  
11 persuasion better appreciate what they are moving towards and the end goal of the meeting.  
12 In turn, this would enable these athletes to collaborate on selecting appropriate interventions  
13 to meet that goal, and provide them with the opportunity to refuse consent to interventions  
14 that do not fit with their value system (cf. Yarhouse & VanOrman, 1999). Based on  
15 collaboration and negotiation, sport psychologists who encounter religious concerns or issues  
16 during intake should discuss with athletes their approach to service delivery, their levels of  
17 comfort and expertise in addressing religious and spiritual issues, how the psychologist’s and  
18 athlete’s religious and spiritual beliefs may impact the goals and process of service delivery,  
19 and what options and alternatives exist that may be appropriate for the athlete based on the  
20 information shared (cf. Barnett & Johnson, 2011). Of course, not all of these elements will be  
21 relevant in each situation; as the relationship unfolds over time, in line with cultural praxis,  
22 sport psychologists must decide, in alliance with athletes, which aspects to address in  
23 partnership to foster capacity.

24           Related to the use of informed consent, sport psychologists should explore some of  
25 the concerns that athletes of religious and spiritual persuasion may have with regards to how

1 they think their values and beliefs will be viewed during service delivery (cf. Gonsiorek et al.,  
2 2009; Yarhouse & VanOrman, 1999). Of particular concern to religious and spiritual clients  
3 is whether nonreligious psychologists will ignore religious or spiritual concerns or assume  
4 they are *merely* psychological and not a valid epistemology (Worthington & Scott, 1983).  
5 According to Worthington and Scott (1983), religious and spiritual clients also express  
6 concern that nonreligious psychologists will assume that the religious and spiritual client  
7 shares broadly accepted cultural values (e.g., premarital sex) or suggest interventions that the  
8 individual feels are contrary to his or her values. Accordingly, it is essential that sport  
9 psychologists suspend preconceptions about the religious and spiritual beliefs of athletes and  
10 demonstrate an appropriate level of respect for such issues avoiding discrimination or bias by  
11 being self-aware and reflective.

12         In the context of cultural praxis, the notion of reflexivity relates to issues of the self  
13 and identity of the practitioner (cf. McGannon & Johnson, 2009; Schinke, McGannon,  
14 Parham, and Lane, 2012). Through reflexive acknowledgement of their own backgrounds,  
15 practitioners can become more aware of the different ways their own self-related views and  
16 cultural identities influence the service delivery process and sport context (Hanrahan, 2011;  
17 Parham, 2005; Schinke et al., 2012). McGannon and Johnson (2009), for example, suggested  
18 that a Caucasian sport psychologist working with minority athletes might ask the following:  
19 In what ways do my social class produce particular power hierarchies? Toward what end do  
20 those power hierarchies structure my interactions with, and interpretations of, the athletes?  
21 How do these same issues structure how the athletes respond in the service delivery context?  
22 In a confessional tale, Schinke et al. (2012) told a story of an Aboriginal athlete that one of  
23 the authors was working with. The athlete was highly spiritual, used sacred medicine each  
24 day, prayed to his God, and he communicated in a manner that differed from the other team  
25 athletes. The individual was extremely quiet and the coaching staff believed that because of

1 this, he was disengaged from his team. By not being culturally reflexive in service delivery,  
2 the consultant might have interpreted the athlete's behaviour as distancing himself and not  
3 being "a team player" if the practitioner took for granted the important behaviours of  
4 individuals within sport teams. Through the lens of cultural reflexivity what is revealed is that  
5 the individual has different values because the discourse within which he frames himself is  
6 different from the dominant perspective that his staff and teammates use. Thus, his  
7 "distancing" when interpreted through the discourse(s) of his culture might not be seen as  
8 disengagement but rather of reflection and introspection.

9         Furthermore, sport psychologists need to appreciate that predicting an athlete's values  
10 and beliefs from denominational affiliation may be impossible given the diversity within a  
11 faith tradition. In the context of cultural praxis, sport psychologists should avoid sensitive  
12 stereotyping whereby the knowledge of cultural differences brings about a stereotypical  
13 interpretation of an individual's behaviour (cf. Andersen, 1993). The goal of becoming  
14 culturally sensitive is to be able to work competently with clients from various cultures while  
15 remaining aware of individual differences (Hanrahan & Schinke, 2011; Parham, 2005).  
16 Accordingly, to earn the respect of religious and spiritual sport performers, it is particularly  
17 important for sport psychologists to recognize the individuality of such athletes, that is,  
18 acknowledging that an athlete might be quite different from other members of their faith  
19 tradition. Likewise, the sport psychologist must also recognize his or her individuality and  
20 various cultural identities in relation to the athlete since self-reflexivity of one's own values  
21 and beliefs about others can impact the practitioner's interactions with the athlete in both  
22 positive and negative ways (Schinke et al., 2012).

### 23 **Responsibility**

24         In the *Ethics code*, there is an emphasis on psychologists' valuing their responsibility  
25 to clients, including the need to consult with, or refer to, other professionals if it is in the best

1 interest of the client. To enhance service delivery within sport psychology, one  
2 recommendation by Andersen et al. (2001) was “to cultivate a rich referral network of  
3 nutritionists, physical therapists ... and religious or pastoral care givers” (p. 17). Gonsiorek et  
4 al. (2009) provided several scenarios where psychologists should seek referral or consultation  
5 with pastoral professionals (see, for a review, Gonsiorek et al., 2009). A number of these  
6 situations are particularly relevant to sport psychologists, including when they are unsure if a  
7 person’s religious and spiritual beliefs are healthy and/or unhealthy, and when an individual  
8 expresses feelings of guilt that seem to originate from perceived infringement of religious and  
9 spiritual values. With regard to referring athletes to others, it is important to realize that value  
10 conflicts will inevitably arise between a sport psychologist and an athlete. The challenge for  
11 sport psychologists “is to recognize when their values and those of their clients conflict to  
12 such an extent that they are ethically obligated to assess their ability to function  
13 professionally” (Yarhouse & VanOrman, 1999, p. 559).

14         In the context of cultural praxis, when working with athletes concerning religious and  
15 spiritual issues, collaboration may not only take place with religious and spiritual  
16 professionals but also with individuals who are knowledgeable about certain philosophies and  
17 relevant community opportunities. Openness and space for these different forms of support  
18 will be of great assistance in helping athletes to access the resources of their religious and  
19 spiritual beliefs and promote the client’s cultural safety. In terms of working with religious  
20 and spiritual professionals, Gamble et al. (2013) found that sport chaplains facilitated  
21 spiritual care in the context of English professional soccer. Self-reflexivity in this context  
22 appeared to play an important role in the service delivery process, with the chaplains  
23 maintaining openness to variation of values and experiences. To illustrate, the chaplains  
24 provided spiritual care for all faiths and were not restricted to those beliefs that were similar  
25 to their own. Examples were cited of providing care for Muslim, Jewish, and Rastafarian

1 players, and for one sport chaplain this even involved conversations regarding the wider  
2 aspects of spiritual life including séances and mediums. In line with cultural praxis, there was  
3 a variety of ways in which the sport chaplains facilitated such spiritual care. Examples ranged  
4 from responding to the everyday spiritual needs of the people around the club environment  
5 (e.g., purchasing bibles, providing bible studies and daily devotionals, and seeking out places  
6 to worship), to more formal situations such as presiding over child baptisms and memorial  
7 services. When collaboration with religious or spiritual personnel may not be relevant or  
8 needed, then referral to an appropriately trained professional may be more appropriate (cf.  
9 American Psychological Association, 2003). This may be the case when an athlete is keen to  
10 explore certain philosophies, such as Buddhism (see, e.g., Andersen & Mannion, 2011;  
11 Thompson & Andersen, 2012; Zizzi & Andersen, 2010). In terms of the role communities  
12 play in athletes' religious and spiritual identities, psychologists should consider harnessing  
13 relevant community resources available to athletes. Within the CSP literature, researchers and  
14 practitioners have found this to be important in the context of working with Canadian  
15 Aboriginal athletes (see, e.g., Schinke et al., 2007), and providing support to Indigenous  
16 athletes from New Zealand (see Hodge, Sharp, & Heke, 2011).

### 17 **Integrity**

18         Watson and Czech (2005) noted that “when dealing with religious athletes, another  
19 important consideration for the sport psychology consultant is the question of professional  
20 boundaries” (p. 30). Although this issue has already been examined in the sport psychology  
21 literature (see Moore, 2003), it is of particular relevance here since the distinction between  
22 the psychological, religious, and spiritual is often blurred (Pargament, 2007). In the context  
23 of English soccer, Gamble et al. (2013) observed that “significant overlap” (p. 249) existed in  
24 the roles of the sport psychologists and sport chaplains. Sport psychologists should use  
25 informed consent effectively to address this problem by facilitating an open and transparent

1 understanding of their professional roles within the sport environment. It is likely that this  
2 will be based around enhancing performance and/or the well-being of athletes, depending on  
3 the philosophical orientation of the sport psychologist. These roles are in contrast to religious  
4 and spiritual professionals who predominantly provide religious and spiritual care (Gamble et  
5 al., 2013; Gonsiorek et al., 2009).

6 Another boundary that is important to attend to is that of self-disclosure (cf. Barnett &  
7 Johnson, 2011). The appropriate and judicious use of self-disclosure can be a therapeutically  
8 powerful intervention that is very meaningful to clients. Yet self-disclosure motivated by the  
9 practitioner's own needs to share personal information, to connect or be intimate with a client,  
10 or that is not motivated by the client's needs, can be potentially harmful (Barnett, 1998). In  
11 the context of cultural praxis, self-reflexivity may be a useful tool for ensuring cultural safety  
12 (cf. McGannon & Johnson, 2009; Schinke et al., 2012). When working with individuals  
13 concerning religious and spiritual issues, cultural reflexivity may help determine whether  
14 sharing one's religious and spiritual beliefs is suitable. More broadly, the practice of self-  
15 reflexivity in this context may result in practitioners engaging in practices that recognize  
16 power structures, which in turn, may empower sport psychologists and/or athletes (cf.  
17 Schinke et al., 2012). By being self-reflexive, practitioners can become more aware of how  
18 their own taken for granted biases and cultural identities affect athletes in relation to the  
19 categories to which they belong, and can therefore begin to attend to power issues (cf.  
20 McGannon & Johnson, 2009).

21 For sport psychologists who are active in a faith tradition, it is important for them *not*  
22 to assume that personal religious and spiritual affiliation makes them an expert in all areas of  
23 theology (cf. Plante, 2007). An ethical dilemma may arise if an athlete is aware of a sport  
24 psychologist's religious and spiritual membership and seeks religious and spiritual guidance  
25 in an area outside his or her expertise and training. A sport psychologist may unconsciously

1 assume the role of a pastoral counselor in this situation but this would be inappropriate and  
2 unethical. Another ethical dilemma to consider is if a sport psychologist works in rural areas  
3 and other small or isolated settings (cf. Schank & Skovholt, 2006). Members of the  
4 community may seek them out for religious or spiritual support because of their interactions  
5 in the community (see Hodge et al., 2011; Ikulayo & Semidara, 2011; Schinke et al., 2007).  
6 In the context of providing support to Canadian Aboriginal athletes, Schinke et al. (2007)  
7 noted that the question of how strategies are developed and integrated should reflect the  
8 preferences of the athlete in relation to his or her cultural identity. When discussing  
9 implications for cultural praxis, the authors concluded that “to discern the best practice  
10 mental and spiritual strategies for Canadian Aboriginal elite athletes requires an awareness of  
11 who the athlete is (family and community of origin included) and who he or she is becoming”  
12 (p. 163). This research highlights the importance of working with and for the community, and  
13 letting their needs and wants drive the service delivery process. However, working in this  
14 type of setting can create the possibility of interacting with individuals professionally as well  
15 as personally in the respective community. Thus, being knowledgeable about boundary issues,  
16 understanding how to establish clear and effective boundaries with clients, and knowing how  
17 to effectively manage multiple cultural identities are all essential for ethical practice and for  
18 clients’ well-being.

### 19 **Competence**

20 An important issue to consider, in light of the present article and the broader special  
21 issue, is the development of cultural competence in sport psychology practitioners (see  
22 Hanrahan, 2010; Ryba et al., 2013; Schinke, Hanrahan, & Catina, 2009; Schinke & Moore,  
23 2011). Cultural competence is defined as “a set of congruent behaviours, attitudes and  
24 policies . . . that reflect how cultural and socio-political influences shape individuals’  
25 worldview and health related behaviours, and how such factors interact at multiple levels of

1 psychological practice” (Comas-Diaz, 2011 as cited in Schinke & Moore, 2011, p. 288).  
2 Ryba et al. (2013) identified three main areas of cultural competence for sport psychology  
3 practitioners (viz. cultural awareness and reflexivity, culturally competent communication,  
4 culturally competent interventions) and these will be discussed below in more detail in the  
5 context of working with religious and spiritual athletes.

6         Although the notion of cultural awareness and reflexivity has already been discussed  
7 in relation to the ethical principles of respect and integrity, this area is equally relevant to  
8 developing cultural competence. Two recommendations by Schinke and Moore (2011) were  
9 to “formally gain knowledge of cultures and cultural differences” and “maintain a  
10 commitment to staying abreast of the evolving literature . . . in this area” (p. 288). As part of  
11 the ethical principle of competence, the *Ethics Code* affirms that psychologists should  
12 “engage in continued professional development [and] remain abreast of . . . scientific [and]  
13 ethical . . . innovations germane to their professional activities” (p. 16). A relevant matter  
14 associated with this guideline is the training that psychologists receive (cf. Gamble et al.,  
15 2013). Aspects of religion and spirituality seem to be absent across many psychology training  
16 programmes in North America (see, for a review, Hage, 2006), and to the best of our  
17 knowledge, this appears to be similar for BPS qualifications in sport (and exercise)  
18 psychology in the United Kingdom. Interestingly, Etzel, Watson, and Zizzi (2004) found that  
19 members of the Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP) who came from a sport  
20 science background were more likely to believe that working with people from diverse  
21 backgrounds without multicultural training was ethical, compared to those who were  
22 educated in mainstream psychology. This finding is important given that many individuals  
23 have trained to become sport psychologists via sport science qualifications. Although it may  
24 be unrealistic to devise a separate course on religion and spirituality, it may be feasible for all  
25 sport psychology training programmes to incorporate content related to religious and spiritual

1 diversity into existing modules (e.g., ethics and individual differences). In addition, it may be  
2 useful to add articles on religion and spirituality to reading lists for ongoing discussion  
3 throughout training. As a caveat to these approaches, it is worth noting that, within clinical  
4 psychology, a belief-practice discrepancy seems to exist in addressing religious and spiritual  
5 issues and, thus, “developing religious and spiritual . . . competence may be more of a  
6 function of personally valuing this domain, rather than an externally imposed framework of  
7 formal training” (Frazier & Hansen, 2009, p. 86). Further research is needed to explore sport  
8 psychologists’ knowledge of their athletes’ religious and spiritual beliefs and to examine this  
9 notion of a belief-practice discrepancy.

10         The second area of cultural competence concerns communication (Ryba et al., 2013).  
11 Language is the most noticeable culturally affected component of communication (Hanrahan,  
12 2010; Hanrahan & Schinke, 2011). In addition to obvious differences in languages (e.g.,  
13 English, Hindi, Urdu), there are also communication challenges with regards to the suitability  
14 of language. Balague (1999) highlighted the issue of using appropriate language when  
15 working with athletes who profess specific religious and spiritual beliefs. For example, in  
16 Islamic cultures sport may not be an appropriate object for devotion (Terry, 2009) with the  
17 common saying of “inshallah” or “God willing” suggesting that individual athletes downplay  
18 the extent to which they determine their own performance outcomes. As a result, many  
19 traditional sport psychology interventions that promote self-talk may be in opposition to  
20 religious practices where faith is placed outside the self (Galloway, 2009). If Muslim athletes  
21 feel that they should not be taking credit for something that belongs to their God or Allah,  
22 positive affirmations could take the form of “Allah gave me the speed and strength, and I  
23 worked for His glory” instead of statements such as “I’m fast, I’m strong, I’m ready”.

24         More broadly, culturally competent communication concerns how to reach shared  
25 meaning with clients. Ryba (2009) discussed the concept of meaningful dialogue in which

1 communication parties engage in the process of searching for a shareable language that  
2 transforms the information gathering dialogue into a shared experience. Through meaningful  
3 dialogues, sport psychology practitioners may facilitate communication between athletes and  
4 coaches representing different religions and spiritual beliefs (e.g., in a sport team) to help  
5 them to be more open-minded and develop a shared “cultural code” with specific cultural  
6 elements relevant to the local setting. Importantly, in light of the present article, Ryba (2009)  
7 emphasized that meaningful dialogue has an ethical aspect shifting the role of the practitioner  
8 “from being the expert who shapes minority athletes’ responses to hegemonic normative  
9 system in the name of athletic success to being a co-participant in the collaborative process of  
10 learning, reflection, critical awareness, and intervention” (pp. 43-44).

11         The third theme related to cultural competence is the challenge of delivering  
12 evidence-based interventions that maintain respect for and consideration of cultural  
13 characteristics including religion and spirituality (Ryba et al., 2013; Schinke & Moore, 2011).  
14 Since contemporary sport psychology theories and applied research have mainly been  
15 developed in North America and Europe (Si, Duan, Li, & Jiang, 2011), practitioners should  
16 consider exploring their cultural relevance when working with clients who express religious  
17 and spiritual affiliation. To illustrate, rational emotive behaviour therapy (REBT), an action-  
18 orientated approach to resolving emotional and behavioural disturbances, has been found to  
19 be particularly efficacious when appropriately sensitive towards clients religious and spiritual  
20 beliefs (e.g., Nielsen, Johnson, & Ridley, 2000). When working with Hindu athletes, for  
21 example, religion-sensitive REBT may include the development of effective scriptural  
22 counter-challenges (e.g., from the Bhagavad Gita) to irrational beliefs and values opposing  
23 Hinduism. By utilizing faith-specific scriptures with religious and spiritual athletes, the sport  
24 psychologist may not only dispute their irrational beliefs more effectively but also increase  
25 the rate at which the athlete understands and accepts a range of other techniques (cf. Nielsen

1 et al., 2000). Although REBT has been seldom considered within the sport psychology  
2 literature, it is worth noting that this method of service delivery appears to be fairly  
3 compatible to religious and spiritual views and can be applied to various athlete-related issues,  
4 such as avoidance motivation in sport involvement (see Ellis, 1994). As a caveat to this  
5 approach, and in the context of cultural praxis, it is worth noting that there is an assumption  
6 within REBT that, for all clients, irrational core beliefs can be altered by objective and  
7 rational negotiation and that rational cognition will positively influence emotion and  
8 behaviour. Applying these ideas to Chinese culture, Si et al. (2011) recommended that  
9 practitioners working with Chinese athletes consider the Chinese holistic thinking style and  
10 introvert emotional expression. Hence, when adapting intervention techniques, the  
11 practitioner's reflexivity should revolve around questions such as: "must the technique itself  
12 be modified or might the best modification be in the area of presentation and style of  
13 delivery?" (Schinke & Moore, 2011, p. 291).

14         When designing and implementing psychological intervention programs, practitioners  
15 should also keep in mind that an important task is to help athletes develop a deep  
16 understanding of, and active adaptation to, the relevant sociocultural system as a whole. To  
17 illustrate, and in line with the theme of religion and spirituality in the present article,  
18 Ghanaian and Nigerian sport psychologists have been exploring West African cultures in  
19 order to develop the traditional belief of juju (i.e., supernatural power or magic). The  
20 invoking of spirits through juju can be used positively to assist a person or team, or  
21 negatively to cause opponents to make mistakes (Diehl, Hegley, & Lane, 2009; Ikulayo &  
22 Semidara, 2009; 2011). Importantly, for cultural praxis, "although western sport psychology  
23 practitioners may have some constraints in working with athletes who believe in juju, it is the  
24 belief system and faith of individuals that really matters" (Ikulayo & Semidara, 2011, p. 344).

25 **Concern**



1 awareness (e.g., of their own culturally constituted beliefs and values), complemented by  
2 cultural knowledge (e.g., understanding of different religious and spiritual practices), and  
3 cultural skills (e.g., cultural reflexivity, culturally informed communication, and  
4 interventions). In the future, from the vantage of applied CSP, it will not just be a matter of  
5 how practitioners adapt current mainstream interventions with individuals from various  
6 religious and spiritual practices, but also how the mainstream learn of different ways of doing  
7 things from cultures previously unrecognized within the field. Although this trajectory is  
8 currently uncharted, sport psychology practitioners who are fascinated with matters of  
9 religion and spirituality have reason to be excited.

10         The present article is intended to enhance practitioners' understanding and application  
11 of the RRICC model (Plante, 2007), through the lens of cultural praxis, when working with  
12 athletes of religious and spiritual persuasion. Closely monitoring ethical issues that emerge –  
13 or are likely to emerge – during the course of our professional work is critical for clients'  
14 cultural safety. It is hoped that highlighting and discussing the ethical principles of respect,  
15 responsibility, integrity, competence, and concern will help sport psychologists better  
16 navigate the often challenging terrain of religious and spiritual beliefs, and contribute to  
17 answering the question “how can ethical cultural sport psychology . . . practice within the  
18 domain of sport be undertaken?” (Ryba et al., 2013, p. 131). As a final caveat, although it is  
19 important that sport psychologists become familiar with ethical guidelines related to religion  
20 and spirituality, reading and having a cognitive understanding of religion and spirituality are  
21 only the first steps (cf. Hanrahan, 2010). For effective cultural praxis, we need to experience  
22 further religious and spiritual practices, reflect on our own, and learn to apply routinely the  
23 knowledge we have gained in the form of culturally appropriate interventions.

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