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Parker, Andrew ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6842-3067> and Watson, Nick J (2015) Sport, Celebrity and Religion: Christianity, Morality and the Tebow Phenomenon. *Studies in World Christianity*, 21 (3). pp. 223-238. doi:10.3366/swc.2015.0125

Official URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3366/swc.2015.0125>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3366/swc.2015.0125>

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/2984>

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Parker, Andrew and Watson, Nick J (2015). *Sport, Celebrity and Religion: Christianity, Morality and the Tebow Phenomenon*. Studies in World Christianity, 21 (3), 223-238. ISSN 1354-9901

Published in Studies in World Christianity, and available online at:

<http://www.eupublishing.com/doi/10.3366/swc.2015.0125>

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

The URL for the published version is <http://dx.doi.org/10.3366/swc.2015.0125>

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Sport, Celebrity and Religion: Christianity, Morality and the Tebow Phenomenon.

Andrew Parker and Nick J. Watson

Citation: Parker, A. and Watson, N.J. (2015) Sport, Celebrity and Religion: Christianity, Morality and the Tebow Phenomenon, *Studies in World Christianity*, 21(3) pp: 223-238.

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Abstract

Sporting celebrities are rarely discussed within the broader realms of theological debate. Yet that is not to say that their identities cannot offer insight into wider patterns of cultural influence. Indeed, it is our contention within this paper that the reverse is true; that analyses of the autobiographical details of contemporary sporting figures represent key sites through which cultural influence can be examined. To this end, we take one sporting icon of recent times, American Football (NFL) star Tim Tebow, and assess his popular cultural image in terms of its contribution to debates surrounding identity, Christianity and morality. Our central thesis is that whilst Tebow's popular cultural image affords all the hallmarks of modern-day 'platform ministry', his articulation of particular norms and values raises questions about the kinds of moral responsibilities high profile Christian athletes have in relation to their expressions of faith.

Keywords: Sporting celebrity, religion, Christianity, morality, popular culture.

Introduction

In recent years, academic discussion surrounding the lives and lifestyles of celebrity sports stars has provided fruitful ground for critiquing the role of sport in modern-day society. Rarely, however, has celebrity been discussed in relation to the sport-media-religion nexus. Drawing upon literature concerning the historical development of celebrity and sociological analyses of celebrity as a concept, this chapter argues that celebrity status is situated at the heart of an individualised and ideologically grounded late capitalist culture in which visual media is central to the production of social identities. In turn, the chapter seeks to uncover ways in which celebrity status and 'stardom' might be viewed as powerful signifiers in terms of popular cultural perceptions of sports performers. In so doing, the chapter considers one of

the sports stars of more recent years, American Football star Tim Tebow, and analyses how his image has been used in order to depict specific messages relating to notions of faith, religion and spirituality.¹

Sport, celebrity and popular culture

The theme of sporting celebrity is something which has attracted a significant amount of attention in recent years. Evident here has been a sense that the autobiographical details of contemporary sports figures represent key sites through which cultural change can be observed, interpreted and analysed. In this chapter we consider one particular sporting celebrity, American Football star Tim Tebow, and assess his image in terms of its contribution to debates surrounding sport, spirituality and celebrity culture. The central argument is that whilst Tebow affords many of the traditional hallmarks of celebrity status, his identity remains rooted within the context of certain moral, ethical and religious values, all of which shape the contours of his public profile.

Celebrity figures do not emerge in a cultural and political vacuum. On the contrary, they are products of the social circumstances upon which their very existence depends. Technological advancements in recent years have spawned both a growth and intensification of media resources which, in turn, has led to the wider popularisation of sport as a cultural spectacle (Whannel, 1992; Boyle and Haynes, 1999; Rowe, 2003, Bernstein and Blain, 2003). Today sports coverage features large amidst the offerings of numerous television and communication networks as the sport-media relationship becomes ever more intimate and lucrative. Such interest necessarily brings with it fame and popular cultural exposure for a number of star performers. Golfer Tiger Woods, tennis player Serena Williams and motor

¹ Sections of this paper have previously appeared elsewhere (see: Bolsmann and Parker, 2007; Cashmore and Parker, 2003; Howe and Parker, 2012; Nalapat and Parker, 2005 and Parker, 2009).

racing star Lewis Hamilton are modern day examples whose level and depth of recognition reflects and in many ways surpasses that of previous 'sporting greats': George Best, Muhammad Ali, Michael Jordan - all of whom sampled fame and notoriety to one degree or another (Whannel, 2002; 2005). Thus, as sports media coverage has developed and intensified, so too has the popular cultural appeal of performers themselves. Under such circumstances, sporting profile and prowess can seamlessly transmute into celebrity status (Cashmore and Parker, 2003; Chung, 2003).

Against this back-drop, it is perhaps not surprising that the identity and influence of sports celebrities has emerged as a contemporary theme of enquiry within a range of academic disciplines (Andrews and Jackson, 2001; Smart, 2005). Of specific interest for writers in this genre is how and why professional sports stars transcend their occupational locales to become wider public figures, national ambassadors, global commodities and/or popular cultural icons (Haynes, 2004, 2005; Harris and Clayton, 2007).² Such discussion has tended to focus on sports performers from Western industrialised nations and is significant for its absences as well as its impositions. It would be fair to say, for example, that in the US and the UK at least, a sense of popular cultural saturation has developed during recent years in relation to images and narratives of particular sporting figures, of which Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods and David Beckham are familiar examples. Part of this monopolisation has as much to do with the sports that these stars represent as it does their individual ability and potential. The intensification of the modern-day sport-media relationship has not been entirely uniform in terms of the amount of attention some sports have come to attract in comparison to others. To this end, there is a related tendency to ignore, or at least overlook, a broader range of sporting

² The term 'stars' is used here to denote those who have become well known publicly as celebrity figures. For more on the construction (and consumption) of 'stars' see Dyer (1988). For more general insight into sporting celebrity and notoriety see Cashmore (2004, 2005, 2006) and Milligan (2004).

heroes/heroines; individuals that, to all intents and purposes, mean just as much (if not more) to millions of people as national and international celebrities and yet who, for some reason are not considered in quite the same way.

Sport, celebrity and social thought

At the collective level, social scientists have put forward a number of explanations as to why and how the cult of celebrity has emerged, the majority of which focus on the shifting social and cultural terrain of modern-day life. One of the most prominent of these explanations is that of Rojek (2001) who identifies three main reasons for these shifts: (i) the democratization of society, (ii) the technological advancements of the mass media age, and (iii) the demise of formalised religion. Taken together what these three factors appear to characterise is a change in the overall complexion of advanced industrial society in what some have called the postmodern age. For Rojek (2001), the demise of monarchical and religious influence coupled with a ubiquitous saturation of media personalities has led to a new fluidity and re-distribution of power in social life, broadly resulting in celebrities taking the place of previously prominent figures (see also Smart, 2005; Ward, 2011).

Like a host of other high profile occupations, professional sport generates an institutional climate conducive to the construction of celebrity status. Sports performers become famous as a consequence of their physical and cognitive abilities; by way of their charismatic demeanor; or sometimes both. As we have seen, for a small number, fame transmutes into an altogether more intense form of recognition around which celebrities are born and who, according to Boorstin's (1961: 58) oft quoted (and perhaps somewhat over-used) phrase, might simply be "... well-known for their well-known-ness". A plethora of writers have attempted to plot the logic of this transformative process, but the fact remains that celebrity is

a highly contested concept that has eluded any real sense of academic definition to date.³ Inherent in the melee of explanatory and analytical offerings on the subject is a conflation of terms and descriptors that are commonly rendered synonymous – ‘stars’, ‘superstars’ ‘heroines’, ‘heroes’, ‘icons’ - and yet which in many ways present their own specific differences and idiosyncrasies (Andrews and Jackson, 2001; Rojek, 2001; Turner, 2004). Characterized by notions of fame, charisma and exception, celebrityhood is a commodification of the human form; the epitome of economic fetishism, the process and product of representations and images promoted and exchanged via the complex interplay of modern-day media networks. Permeating every thread of the social fabric, celebrity sports stars represent the epitome of vicarious achievement and conspicuous consumption (Cashmore and Parker, 2003).

The speculative nature of debate surrounding celebrityhood has been evident in analyses concerning taxonomies of celebrity status. Devoid of any real sense of empirical assessment, such discussions demonstrate how notions of ‘stardom/fame’, ‘celebrity’ and ‘iconicity’ have been contested.⁴ That said, some writers have commented productively on how various ‘levels’ of celebrity might exist and how this can affect the extent to which sports personalities impact or transcend their local, regional and national contexts. For example, Kear and Steinberg (1999) argue that icons comprise quintessential (often religious) representations of culture; their status determined not by their iconicity alone but by the levels of ‘subjective identification’ to which they are open and the degree to which their depiction transcends and outgrows its origins. Yet as Ward (2011: 32) has pointed out, whilst

³ Academic offerings on the broader concept of celebrity are nothing new. For more on this subject see the work of Debord (1968), Monaco (1978), Gamson (1994), Marshall (1997), Boyle and Haynes (1999), Evans and Wilson (1999), Giles (2000), Turner *et al* (2000) and Smart (2005). For specific discussion on taxonomies of celebrity see Rojek (2001) and Turner (2004).

⁴ For specific discussion on taxonomies of celebrity see Rojek (2001) and Turner (2004). For more on the icon/iconicity dyad see Kear and Steinberg (1999).

celebrities may, at times, serve as “sources for personal transformation and aspiration”, rarely, it seems, do ‘fans’ regard their popular cultural idols as ‘divine beings’ or benchmarks of ethical and/or moral stability (see also Laderman, 2009). In this sense, though the notion of ‘celebrity worship’ has become an accepted part of everyday parlance, the reality is that the relationship between celebrity culture and religion is, at best, partial and limited (Ward, 2011).

Of course, as far as modern-day capitalism is concerned commodification is all-inclusive, nothing and no one escapes its grasp (Featherstone, 1991; Shilling, 2003). The culture of which celebrity status is such an integral part is one in which images of sporting celebrities circulate, on billboards, in magazines and in television commercials. We consume their image, their looks, their fame, their talent, their wealth, their popularity. As Ward (2011: 3) argues, “[C]elebrities matter not because of who they are but what they represent”. Unlike the majority of celebrity sports stars Tim Tebow is neither the epitome of vicarious achievement nor the exemplar of conspicuous consumption, his celebrity status emanating not simply from his sporting prowess but from the moral, ethical and religious values which he embodies and which the spectacle of his sporting achievements represent. Indeed, in many respects it would be naïve to compare Tebow with other sports stars on a number of counts. For one thing, whilst he may have made the initial transition from sporting fame to national celebrity, he falls well short of the iconic status afforded certain others. Likewise, whilst his high school and college sporting achievements were significant, his career as a professional in the National Football League (NFL) was relatively modest and short lived.

It is here that we can observe vestiges of Debord’s (1968) influential thesis on the *Society of the Spectacle*. For Debord, the celebrity plays a specific role amidst the banal surroundings of

modern society where the influence of consumption and commodification dictate the fragmentation of everyday life:

The celebrity, the spectacular representation of a living human being, embodies this banality by embodying the image of a possible role. Being a star means specializing in the *seemingly lived*; the star is the object of identification with the shallow seeming life that has to compensate for the fragmented productive specializations which are actually lived. Celebrities exist to act out various styles of living and viewing society – unfettered, free to express themselves *globally*. They embody the inaccessible result of social *labor* by dramatizing its by-products magically projected above it as its goal: *power and vacations*, decision and consumption.

(Debord, 1968, para. 60, original emphasis).

The concept of consumption is necessarily pertinent to the present discussion. There is an entire industry dedicated to producing images of sporting celebrities. However, what Debord (1968) reminds us of is that consumption is only one part of a broader social relation in capitalism, a key feature of which is production. Without production there is no consumption. A common characteristic of contemporary sociological debate is the de-centring of the labour process in favour of a leaning towards the importance of consumption as a point of reference. Such discussion has had a tendency to focus perhaps too readily on particular schools of thought at the expense of certain others. In fact, to deny the importance of production is to deny the very logic of our existence within the context of capital. As the defining principle of capitalist society, labour underpins all that is produced and, therefore, all that is consumed. In this sense, consumption is just one ‘moment’ in the social relations of production when

(and where) labour has particular (exchange) value. That ‘moment’ is the manifestation of the labour process.

For athletes like Tim Tebow production is not simply about the manufacture of a personalised image. Rather it also concerns the sporting *labour* which he fulfils. In this sense, production and consumption combine; the former grounded in the labour process surrounding his athletic prowess and lifestyle (his embodied sporting practice and habitual disposition), the latter representing the mainstay of his celebrity existence. Thus, Tebow’s identity is more complex than Debord’s (1968) analysis infers. His commodified persona represents a range of diverse elements collectively promoting specific conceptions of gender, religion and identification. In turn, Tebow is revered not simply as a consequence of his manufactured image but also as a result of his work, his labour, his productivity. Without hard physical work Tebow would not have perfected his sporting talents and would not have emerged as a star performer. Indeed, a certain kind of work has played a central role in his emergence; work which resonates well with the critiques put forward by Brohm (1978) and Rigauer (1981) in their analyses of the relationship between sporting performance, Taylorism, mass production and nationalism. Notwithstanding his natural sporting talent, Tebow is a product of the repetitious process of becoming a successful athlete whereby a relentless pursuit of one’s dream comes only via a series of predictable and heavily prescribed workplace behaviours. That said, whilst production is important in terms of his popular cultural identity, consumption is tantamount to the maintenance of this position. Without work, Tebow has no value. Without value, he ceases to exist as a consumable item (Smart, 2005).

Sport, celebrity and Tim Tebow

As academic commentary around the sport-celebrity relationship has increased, so too has that concerning the sport-celebrity-Christianity nexus (see Feezell, 2013; Newman, 2010; Rial, 2012). Common here are criticisms surrounding the extent to which sport is used as a ready-made billboard for the promotion of Christian values and as a platform for proselytizing sports stars (see Epstein, 2011; Krattenmaker, 2010).

Enter Tebow. Chosen-one, sporting messiah, moral and ethical guardian, corporate and commercial standard bearer, modern-day muscular Christian. Calm, compassionate, ‘down-to-earth’; quintessential all-American (Moore, Keller and Zemanek, 2011). What shapes this identity? Tebow, it seems, is a cultural phenomenon as much for his religious beliefs as for his sporting prowess. Born in the Philippines in 1987, the fifth (and youngest) child of Baptist missionaries, Tebow’s childhood was steeped in the morals and values of evangelical Christianity. Home-schooled alongside his siblings, he later attended Trinity Christian Academy in his hometown of Jacksonville moving to Allen D. Nease High School in Ponte Vedra, Florida, thus taking advantage of a 1996 change to Florida state law which allowed home-schooled students to participate in public high school athletic programmes (now more commonly known as the ‘Tebow Law’). As his sporting profile developed, awards and accolades followed. Next up was an athletics scholarship at the University of Florida (2006-2009) during which time Tebow’s popular cultural capital increased further. Despite initially being named as the University’s second-string quarterback in 2006, Tebow took over as starter in 2007 winning the Heisman Trophy that same year, the first college sophomore to do so (placing third and fifth in the same competition in 2008 and 2009 respectively). In 2007 he also won the Davey O’Brien Award, in recognition of his status as the nation’s best quarterback. Tebow’s success also impacted the fortunes of his team – the Florida Gators

twice winning the Bowl Champion Series (BCS) during his tenure (2006 and 2008) - and those of his coach Urban Meyer, whose cultural capital flourished during the same period (Fish, 2011). By the end of his college career, Tebow held a plethora of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), Southeastern Conference (SEC) and University of Florida records and had been voted most valuable player (MVP) by his team-mates for three consecutive seasons (2007, 2008, 2009) (Tebow, 2011).

Perhaps not surprisingly, Tebow was heavily touted for the glitz and glamour of the professional game and after seeing out his senior season at Florida (2009), he was selected by the Denver Broncos in the first round of the 2010 NFL Draft signing a five-year contract said to be worth in the region of \$11m. It would be fair to say that Tebow's transition from the collegiate to the professional ranks was not without its ups and downs. Certainly, concerns around his potential to make the grade in the NFL circulated from the very beginning – his passing ability being a point in question. He started the last three games of his first season with the Broncos and became full-time starting quarterback six games into the 2011 programme, taking over from Kyle Orton. After displaying poor form early on, things improved for the Broncos as the season progressed with Tebow inspiring them to a number of 'come from behind' wins. But during the latter stages of the 2011 season the Bronco's form stuttered and in the wake of the arrival of newly recruited quarterback Peyton Manning, Tebow was eventually traded to the New York Jets in March 2012. Finding himself in relatively uncharted territory as a peripheral team member and out-of-favour newcomer, Tebow received little game time with the Jets and was released by them in April 2013, signing with the New England Patriots later that year (June 2012). With footballing obscurity beckoning, Tebow again failed to make any significant impression and having competed in just two pre-season games, he was subsequently released by the Patriots in August 2013. His

professional footballing career seemingly over, he took up the role of college football analyst with the broadcaster ESPN in December that same year.

Has US sport ever seen an athlete quite like Tim Tebow? As we have noted, in terms of his level of impact as a high profile football player, Tebow's career has been modest to say the least. As for his influence as a religious role model, the impact could be said to have been slightly greater. In by-gone days, there were those whose religious beliefs singled them out as influential sporting figures: Billy Sunday, Gil Dodds, George Foreman, Joe Gibbs, all played a role in fore-fronting the Christian message in and through North American sport (see Ladd and Mathisen, 1999). Accompanying these stalwarts of US culture are sporting contemporaries from further afield, one of the most famous of which, Eric Liddell, posthumously gained Hollywood acclaim (see Cashmore, 2008). Whilst we might reflect on these sporting notables as stars of a previous age, what we must also acknowledge is that they operated largely before the advent of the mass media and, in this sense, their stardom should be viewed as both partial and limited in modern-day terms. These individuals were certainly famous and may well have been star performers, but they were not celebrities in the contemporary sense of the word.

Tim Tebow is a hybrid, at once a sportsman and moral custodian, who allows his religious beliefs to be framed as a public spectacle. Indeed, further fuelling the 'Tebow phenomenon' is the controversy that his Christian values have courted. In this sense, Feezell (2013) argues, Tebow has become something of a polarising figure in US popular culture generating criticisms and plaudits in equal measure along the way. At one level, the key characteristics of his spiritual profile are in no way unique - explicit expressions of thanks to God in relation to his sporting talents and successes, kneeling in prayer during games (commonly referred to

as ‘Tebowing’), the acknowledgement of sport as a ‘platform’ for ministry, the framing of himself as moral and ethical role model, off-field good works and impeccable track record, bestselling (autobiographical) author – all of which are commonplace amongst celebrity Christian athletes. During his college days, Tebow was known for displaying references to Bible verses on his eye black, a practice which led the NCAA to amend its regulations to prevent such occurrences. Though other athletes had undertaken similar courses of action, the amendment, perhaps somewhat unsurprisingly, came to be referred to as the ‘Tebow Rule’ (Epstein, 2011). Equally controversial was Tebow’s participation in a television advertisement screened in February 2010 during the first quarter of Super Bowl XLIV, when an organisation advocating a particular set of moral values, *Focus on the Family*, aired its presentation ‘Celebrate family, celebrate life’, in which Tebow’s mother Pam delivered an explicit ‘pro-life’ message directly relating to the circumstances surrounding his own birth.

What should we make of all of this? In his in-depth examination of Tebow’s popular cultural profile, Feezell (2013: 137) explores the nature and extent of the controversy surrounding the Tebow phenomenon and attempts to unpack the “critical reaction to his public religiosity”. Drawing on Krattenmaker’s (2010) highly disparaging (some might say polemical) account of the sport and Christianity relationship in the US, Feezell (2013) explores the key tenets of the Tebow narrative in order to present a broader analysis of how the sport-celebrity-religion nexus plays out in contemporary society.

For Krattenmaker (2010), the sport-Christianity dyad raises a number of concerns, not least: the intentional infiltration of evangelical Christianity into commercialised sport, the inappropriate framing of the faith-sport relationship, and the proselytization of religious views by high profile (‘platform’) sports personnel. Utilising these assertions as a kind of conceptual canvass, Feezell (2013) considers a number of issues in relation to Tebow’s

alleged ‘conspicuous piety’ and the appropriateness (or not) of his behaviour. He does this by addressing a series of broader questions: is it appropriate to bring faith into sports? To what extent (if at all), is it acceptable for high profile athletes to impose their religious worldview (and associated moral and ethical opinions and beliefs) onto others? How and to what extent might such practices be insensitive, divisive and contrary to a balanced awareness and appreciation of religious diversity? Does such an approach have the potential to raise questions as to the depth and level of the theological ideas in play? In terms of the kind of public reaction Tebow and other Christian athletes often generate, Feezell’s (2013: 142) conclusions are as follows:

Tebow’s behavior is polarizing because he appears to ignore or at least not acknowledge that the world of religious belief is complicated and diverse. Given the highly public nature of Tebow’s conspicuous piety, no wonder that thoughtful people are troubled by either his ignorance or his unconcern with how belief, both private and public, should come to grips with facts about religious diversity.

Having established a number of reasons as to why one might consider Tebow’s conspicuous piety as problematic, Feezell (2013) goes on to consider how such opinions and beliefs might be framed differently in a world characterized by religious diversity. In so doing, he makes the case for an alternative framing of the sport-celebrity-religion relationship. For Feezell (2013), the issue is not that sports and faith should be kept apart, rather that high profile Christian athletes have a series of moral and epistemic responsibilities in relation to their expressions of faith precisely because they are who they are.

Feezell (2013) begins his analysis by making a series of assumptions. These are as follows: (i) that people have a variety of religious beliefs; (ii) that religions make truth claims (i.e. about what is true and what is correct); and (iii) given the myriad of regional, national, and international events that nowadays speak to notions of ‘religious disagreement’, it is increasingly difficult for a well-informed person to ignore religious diversity within the context of contemporary society. Feezell (2013) follows up these assumptions with two key questions: in light of such diversity how should one view other religions, and secondly, how should one’s own religious beliefs be held? Utilising the work of McKim (2001), Feezell (2013) then constructs a series of propositions around the concepts of ‘confident exclusivism’ (the demonstration of exclusivist beliefs) and ‘fallibilism’ (the notion that one’s own views may be wrong and that the views of someone else may be right) in relation to the ways in which Tebow and other celebrity athletes often express their own religious beliefs. For Feezell (2013), and on the basis of the assumptions and propositions raised, such expressions are fundamentally flawed on three levels. First, that as a well-informed, privileged and educated person Tebow has a responsibility to exhibit a greater sense of awareness to notions of ‘impartial reflection’ when it comes to his religious beliefs. Second, that Tebow has a responsibility to move from a position of ‘confident exclusivism’ with regards to his faith, to one which demonstrates a sense of fallibilism which, by its very nature, would facilitate a broader sense of reflection, humility and modesty in relation to the articulation of his own beliefs and the existence of other ‘religious possibilities’. Thirdly, Feezell (2013) argues that because of his lifelong saturation in evangelical Christianity, Tebow demonstrates a spiritual blind-spot with respect to his status as a role model insofar as this appears to go beyond the ‘modelling’ of moral and ethical standards and into the epistemic realm where there is an intentionality around “doxastic matters” (p.156).⁵ That is, the approach taken by Tebow is

⁵ For more on sports celebrities as role models see Rojek (2006).

one which appears keen to proffer not simply how people should behave but what they should believe – all of which, for Feezell (2013: 157), amounts to a lack of responsibility on the part of the celebrity Christian athlete:

Privileged persons, including Tebow, have a strong reason to hold religious beliefs fallibly. Fallibilist religious believers will be disposed, both practically and attitudinally, to express certain praiseworthy intellectual traits of cognizers. Moreover, celebrated athletes who believe themselves to be role models will have special responsibilities to be epistemic role models, characterized by intellectual impartiality, openness, humility and modesty, and tolerance. To the extent that Tebow and others do not develop and express these traits with respect to their religious beliefs and in their expressions of religiosity, we have reasoned reservations about their conspicuous religiosity and they have good reasons to change their attitudes and behavior.

Whether or not Tim Tebow's departure from the sporting limelight will serve to temper the way in which he articulates his religious beliefs, only time will tell. This is, of course, a decision for him. A career in sports broadcasting may inadvertently facilitate - or even necessitate - such change. Whatever happens, because of the popular cultural capital which he still commands, Tebow will need to tread carefully the tightrope of religious advocacy, if he is to avoid accusations of conspicuous piety and if he is to become (and remain) the spiritual role model that he aspires to be. At the same time, he will need to maintain some level of popular cultural exposure to bolster his personal appeal. Modern-day muscular Christian or not, in the commodified world of sports-media, visibility is everything.

Conclusions

Scrutiny and conjecture surrounding the public and private lives of celebrity sports stars are part of everyday media discourse. Whether sporting celebrities are famous for their athletic prowess and talent or simply 'known for their well-knownness' both we and they have come to accept (and expect) the intrusive strategies of the world's media and the inquisitive gaze which their popularity affords. Since exploding onto the high school and collegiate football scene, Tim Tebow has never been far from the centre of popular cultural life in the US. Yet on entering retirement from the sport, he now faces the prospect of being eased out of the media gaze. Where, we might ask, does this leave Tebow as a sporting celebrity and/or as a spokesperson on wider social issues? What does this mean for this modern-day moral and ethical sporting role model?

There are a number of things to consider here. First, we must acknowledge that Tebow's celebrity profile did not emerge in a social, cultural and political vacuum. On the contrary, part of the reason for his appeal is the synchronicity with which his own sporting potential developed alongside the sport-media-business expansion of the 1990s and the religious undertones of US society. Second, we must recognise that Tebow's celebrity status is primarily a national rather than an international/global issue. His is a celebrity born out of cultural acceptance as a quintessentially all-American figure steeped in the values of evangelical Christianity. Third, and as is often the case for celebrity figures, time ultimately changes the nature and level of influence and, in this sense, whilst Tebow's impact in and through sport may alter or diminish, that is not to say that he will disappear completely from public view.

As we have argued, one of the hallmarks of celebrity status is that it allows individuals to transcend their occupational locales, conferring upon them a popularity which often manifests within a range of alternative social settings. Latterly, Tebow has taken up a position in the sports media which will go some way to maintaining his profile as a public figure. Fourth, despite the amount of media coverage afforded to him, we must guard against assuming that we actually *know* anything about Tim Tebow as a person. All we can say with any degree of certainty is that we know something of him in terms of his popular appeal; his mass media representations and his celebrity identifications - of which Christianity is a key characteristic. Finally, we must accept that these representations are, more often than not, strategically managed and finely crafted portraits of the person whom marketing and advertising executives wish (and need) to depict. The celebrity-media relationship is symbiotic. Sports celebrities simply cannot maintain their popular cultural position without a marketised media presence. For Tim Tebow himself, recent years have witnessed continued influence in the marrying of his popular cultural image and his religious identity. In light of the critical analysis put forward here with regard to the formulation and expression of that identity, what remains to be seen is how long this level of status and influence will prevail.

Following on from our analysis of the sport, religion and celebrity interface, through the provocative and counter cultural story of Tim Tebow - evangelical Christian American sports star - it would be interesting and fruitful for future studies to examine the on-going tension between 'overt' and 'covert' ministry in sports settings. This has the potential to address some of the philosophical issues raised by Feezell (2013) from a Christian theological perspective. Considerations of overt ministry might include, for example, demonstratively praying/thanking God in public spaces (e.g., 'Tebowing'), or testifying to ones faith in post-game interviews whilst analyses of covert ministry might feature the demonstration of

Christian values in the athlete's behaviour and words spoken, that is, their life becomes an 'incarnational message', a 'lived sermon', to those with whom they interact within sporting locales. This would be a worthwhile project given that to date work in this area has often dichotomised the overt-covert ministry argument in sport (often by 'proof texting' bible verses to support their thesis), and in so doing, has neglected a key theological (and biblical) principle: that the 'motivation of the heart' *behind* any form of ministry in sport, is arguably the determining factor as to whether it is deemed appropriate from a Christian worldview.

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Word length: 6,357.