

In a few instances, *Passion Plays* contains puzzling errors. For example, Balmer writes that the Young Men's Hebrew Association expanded as "Reconstructionist Judaism sought to mimic institutional churches" (4). Based on the cited articles (which do not mention Reconstructionist Judaism at all) and the broader history of the Young Men's Hebrew Association, it seems likely that Balmer intended to refer to Reform Judaism. In another instance, Balmer claims that the House of David's baseball program "fielded a team of cultural outcasts, Jewish and otherwise" (27). The House of David, a religious movement that considers itself to be grounded in Christianity, at no time made any particular effort to hire Jewish baseball players. While these errors may seem small, they are glaring enough that their presence is surprising.

In his conclusion, Balmer delves into what he identifies as an escapist quality in this shift from finding meaning and community in religion to finding meaning and community in sports. Balmer argues that this is a key component of white fans' backlash toward black athletes who are seen as transgressing "an idealized separation between sports and politics" (128). Although Balmer briefly mentions Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf while discussing athletes' protests during the national anthem, a further exploration of the lives of some of the Muslim athletes Balmer mentions in his chapter on basketball, like Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, along with other Muslim athletes like Muhammad Ali, could have been useful in articulating his arguments about the dynamics between white fans and black athletes. Additionally, Balmer's assertion that fantasy sports might replicate a system that views athletes as "a form of chattel expected to perform, not opine" is somewhat undermined by his admission that he "can't claim any experience or much knowledge" of fantasy sports (130). It would have been interesting to see Balmer further explore this argument about fantasy sports, as it could be a compelling extension of his arguments earlier in the chapter.

*Passion Plays* is not a declension narrative. Balmer does not bemoan the migration from religion to sports for meaning making among some white men; rather, he asks what this migration can tell us about the history and future of sports in the United States and Canada, and what its racial and gender dimensions might be. *Passion Plays* would serve as a useful introductory text for undergraduate students or non-academic readers interested in the intersections of religion and sports.

Alexandria Griffin  
New College of Florida  
doi:10.1017/S0009640724000337

***Religion and the Rise of Sport in England.* By Hugh McLeod. Oxford: OUP, 2023. 282 pp. \$41.99.**

Hugh McLeod's *Religion and the Rise of Sport in England* explores the titular relationship over two centuries beginning in the early nineteenth century. This is a rich and enjoyable analysis, well-crafted and convincing. McLeod contends that transformative processes initiated in the century leading up to World War I – the religious embrace of sport – actively molded societal norms. The first half positions sport as both a

symptom and a catalyst for profound societal transformations, setting the stage for the early twentieth century. The latter half of the book is less revelatory, but it is satisfying nonetheless. Put in sporting terms, McLeod scored often in the first chapters, while the second half was a possession game. The book's key assertion – that sport actively shaped societal norms – challenges the view that it was merely a passive reflection of cultural shifts.

This book reads much like a culmination to McLeod's body of work, which explores the relationship between religion, society, and culture in Britain. Building upon his research, here McLeod delves deeper into themes of secularization, denominationalism, and the shifts in social and cultural discourse that have reshaped British society since the early nineteenth century.

McLeod starts by examining the challenges arising from a transition from the old to the new sporting worlds. He highlights the clergy's evolving attitudes toward sports. These focussed on the push-pull dynamic between reform-minded individual clergymen and "sporting parsons" juxtaposed with the strictures imposed largely by Evangelical sects. The period surrounding the Great Reform Act marked a major shift in societal perceptions of sports, intersecting with fundamental religious and cultural transformations. The church in this period began to extol the virtues of certain sports, doing so largely in response to the presence of unique social tensions, possibly the most intense in English history, which culminated in the Act. McLeod captures contemporaneous conflicts, portraying how both old sports including cruel blood-sports and gambling culture and "new" plebian sports like football and cricket (with their perceived frivolity) came into conflict with the world of religion.

Discussing how attitudes shifted, McLeod's exploration of individual agency within religious institutions is revelatory. He shows that the actions of individual church leaders made pivotal breakthroughs while some, conversely, blocked progress. These fascinating individual vignettes feed into the broader narrative, which portrays a slow and incremental systemic change, sometimes spurred by extraordinary actors. The book largely rejects a top-down doctrinal shift, his evidence showing the power of grassroots collective action.

McLeod explores the connection between religious critiques and the changing world of sports, demonstrating how societal changes impacted their relationship. A clear example is found in the author's examination of "Muscular Christianity" (108–113). It is a key vector through which many churchmen rationalized acceptance of sport. Such acceptance, over time, morphed from acquiescing in their parishioners' practice of sport to eventually championing programs and institutional regimes devoted to physical wellness and fitness, such as the YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association). In this context, McLeod shows how the working-class sporting world became a battleground for proofs of masculinity, where fighting was a frequent manifestation. In this regard, the book shows that the context, rather than the sport itself, often fueled conflicts with religious ethics.

The author makes clear that the second half of the nineteenth century was the crucial period of transition during which ideas of religious freedom and toleration came to be widely accepted in principle. And for a variety of political and social reasons, England avoided polarization between the religious right and the secular left. Furthermore, in English sport, the deepest divisions were not of religion or politics, but of class and gender. Thus, his examination of these societal factors – labor, gender, and class – and their connections with sport helps us understand the secularizing process in Victorian England.

Of special interest is the author's exploration of the history of women's sports in England. McLeod here signals a potential avenue for further research, especially regarding working-class women's sports. Proceeding from fox hunting as the aristocracy's first fashionable sport for women, McLeod notes that women found unexpected allies in the "Muscular Christian" movement, whose emphasis on physical development and moral character provided a springboard for their own arguments for participation in sports. This section traces the evolution of women's sports from swimming – the first popular sport for women – to cycling, field hockey, rounders, and cricket. Here, as elsewhere in the narrative, class emerges as a stronger cohesive force in the early growth of women's sports. As women's sports expanded beyond the upper classes, the influence of churches and organizations like the Young Women's Christian Association became more pronounced. The author notes that, "Playing together often went with praying together, and those not interested in praying welcomed the facilities these institutions provided" (114). His analysis of women's sports also serves as an effective microcosm of the book's broader historical narrative.

In discussing the latter half of the twentieth century, McLeod focuses on football fandom. He points out how fans forge pseudo-religious connections with clubs that have come to form a significant part of their identity. For McLeod, there is a parallel between fandom and religious or political affiliation, underscoring the importance one assigns to one's football allegiances. Further, his discussion of the "religion of running" extends this analysis into the twenty-first century. By drawing parallels with ascetic religious practices that emphasize self-discipline and purification, he points out the enduring nature of sport as a cultural phenomenon mirroring diverse forms of religious engagement, which themselves bifurcated heavily in the latter half of the twentieth century.

The author mined an impressive array of primary sources, starting near his home-base at the University of Birmingham's research library, Birmingham City Archives, and local YMCA Archives. The secondary source list is vast and impressive in size and scope. Any complaints are mere niggles. For example, the book focusses heavily on the early nineteenth century, but more exploration of the period from 1850 to 1890, which focusses on the experience in public schools, would have been welcome.

*Religion and the Rise of Sport in England* is a significant contribution to the historiography of religion, sport, and – perhaps more so than either – secularization in English society, in which the rise of sport is positioned as both symptomatic and causal. McLeod closes with a section on football fandom. This is an effective way to end the book because it challenges modern readers to reconsider conventional notions of faith and identity. He prompts readers to consider the impact of sport on both individual lives and the collective consciousness. These very considerations form the heart of the book, explored in depth throughout two centuries of English social and sporting evolution. Its methodological rigor, the prodigious use of personal vignettes, and its exploration of something so central to the English cultural psyche as sport recommend the book for scholars and enthusiasts alike.

John Maker

Independent Scholar

doi:10.1017/S0009640724000532