

“Don’t ever mix God with sports”: Christian religion in athletes’ stories of life transitions

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Abstract

Sport psychology researchers have increasingly recognised the need to adopt a holistic perspective when seeking to understand athletes’ adaptation to life transitions. The present study sought to understand how religion influences athletes’ journeys in sport and experiences of life transitions. Two Christian elite athletes participated in life story interviews which we analysed via narrative analysis. Although the participants narratively separated religious belief from sport, religion, as a source of basic world assumptions and values, provided a broader framework of meaning and continuity in their sport lives. Yet, both stories involved a growing distance to institutional religious practices and movement towards individualised religiosity as they traversed cultural and developmental transitions. For applied practitioners, it is important to be aware of the unique ways in which religion influences the sport life, and to recognise personal and cultural attitudes that will shape their applied work with religious athletes.

Keywords: Christianity, career transition, life meaning, athletic identity, adaptation

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Research into athletes’ developmental trajectories has diversified in recent years, and there has been an emerging sensitivity to athletes’ broader frameworks of life meaning and how they shape sporting experiences (Blodgett, Ge, Schinke, & McGannon, 2017; Ryba, Schinke, Stambulova, & Elbe, 2017; Schinke et al., 2007). A number of researchers have acknowledged the need to adopt “a whole person” perspective in order to understand how people respond and adapt to transitions in sport life (Knowles & Lorimer, 2014; Stambulova, 2017). Although religiosity has been argued to play a central role in individual career decision-making processes, overall life course development (Richmond, 2016) and adaptation to life transitions (Pargament, 2001), it remains one of the less studied dimensions of athletes’ life-worlds and career development trajectories. This paper contributes to filling this gap by studying the role of religion, understood as the beliefs, practices, values and communities that are related to the transcendent (Saroglou, 2011), in athletes’ life narratives and experiences of life transitions.

Although no studies have specifically focused on religion in relation to athletes’ career development and transitions, a few studies in psychology and sociology of sport have provided accounts of how religion and sport intersect. Most often, studies and applied reflections have illustrated the powerful influence of religion on sporting experience. That is, religious athletes may experience their sporting talent as a gift from God (Balague, 1999; Mosley, Frierson, Cheng, & Aoyagi, 2015) and interpret their daily experiences in sport through their religious framework of life meaning (Blodgett et al., 2017; Mosley et al., 2015; Nesti, 2011). Furthermore, a body of literature has explored religious practices such as prayer and their role in athletes’ mental preparation to competitions (Czech & Bullet, 2007; Czech, Wrisberg, Fisher, Thompson, & Hayes, 2004; Schinke et al., 2007; Vernacchia, McGuire, Reardon, & Templin, 2000). Religion has been

moreover reported to be an important source of meaning for some athletes when facing critical moments such as injury or poor performance (Grindstaff, Wrisberg, & Ross, 2010; Nesti, 2011; Vernacchia et al., 2000).

Stevenson's (1991) sociological study also identified three different ways in which Christian athletes in Canada negotiated their religious and sporting identities. The first type he identified was *the segregated type*, referring to athletes who almost entirely separated these two life contexts and identities. These athletes only expressed their Christianity in a religious community and explained that sport had its own ethics that need not be congruent with Christian values. Some talked about how they "leave God on the sidelines" (p. 366) and did not see a problem in hurting an opponent. The second, and dominant type was *the selective type* where athletes could express their religious identity in some sporting situations, but the athletic identity and sport-specific ethics mostly took precedence in a sport context. For example, one athlete explained that in order to survive in sport, "you've got to be downright mean sometimes" (p. 367); however, most often athletes maintained that the sport practices should be within the rules of the game, felt that religion helped them to cope with winning and losing, and some talked about "winning for God" and "giving glory to God" (p. 368). Finally, a few athletes were identified as *the committed type* for whom the Christian identity was considered to have the primacy in all contexts of life. These athletes talked about always being accountable to God and the overriding importance of religion over sport. However, some athletes admitted sometimes compromising their Christian identity to be accepted in the team, and some of them had ultimately decided to retire from sport to resolve the dissonance between these two identities.

Whilst research in sport psychology has often considered religion as a unified construct, or focused on one aspect of religion only (e.g., prayer), scholarship in psychology of religion has

sought to distinguish different dimensions of religion to gain a more nuanced understanding of how religion manifests in individual lives (Glock, 1962; Saroglou, 2011). Saroglou (2011) suggested to that religion could be analytically divided into four distinct, yet inter-related components: (1) *believing* (in some form of transcendence, basic world assumptions, and meaningfulness of life); (2) *bonding* (with a deeper reality, others and/or the ‘inner’ self, often through religious rituals such as prayer, meditation or worship); (3) *behaving* (in line with specific norms and moral standards derived from religion); and (4) *belonging* (in a community of believers that is shaped by tradition and imagined glorious future). These dimensions were suggested to represent the cognitive, emotional, moral, and social elements of religion, respectively. Yet there could be large cultural variance on the salience of different dimensions of religiosity. For example, liberal European Protestantism has typically emphasised individual belief, whereas morality has been a dominant dimension in conservative Protestantism in the U.S. (Saroglou, 2011). Catholicism, on the other hand, has been described as a practice-based religion in Canada where one of our participants had grown up (Beaman, 2012). At the same time, especially for transnational migrants, the religious experience is often shaped by global circulation of religious ideas and practices rather than the family tradition or country of origin alone (Levitt, Lucken, & Barnett, 2011).

To sum up, even though religion is increasingly recognised as a central dimension of life meaning for many athletes (Balague, 1999; Nesti, 2011; Sarkar, Hill, Parker, 2015), no studies in sport psychology have explored religion’s role in shaping athletes’ life trajectories in sport and experiences of life transitions. Building upon Stevenson’s (1991) typology of how Christian athletes negotiate their religious and sporting identities, as well as the multidimensional framework of religion (Saroglou, 2011), the present study seeks to expand understandings of how Christian

religion shapes athletes' journeys in sport. The following research questions guided our inquiry: How do Christian athletes understand the relationship between religion (as believing, behaving, bonding, and belonging) and sport? How can their stories be understood in relation to Stevenson's (1991) three types of identity negotiation (segregated, selective, and committed)? How do the various dimensions of religion shift within athletes' developmental journeys and life transitions?

Methodology

Our analytic work is based on an existential psychological view on narrative theory, where the search for meaning is understood as a basic condition of human existence (Richert, 2010). Although meaning is *lived* – that is, it is found in our concrete actions and engagement in the world – it is at the same time generated in reflection and language. In other words, our story-telling activity locates us in a particular socio-cultural setting which provides us with a horizon of understanding (Richert, 2010). This implies that meanings are enabled or constrained by our embodied capabilities and limitations, but also culturally constituted in that our storytelling is shaped by cultural narrative resources that are accessible to us (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). The (sub)cultural narrative resources guide us in constructing explanations that 'make sense' and help us in selecting events and experiences that 'should' be included in telling a life story to a particular audience (McAdams, 2008).

The life story approach (Atkinson, 2002) takes seriously the storied nature of human life and allows for understanding how individuals negotiate change and continuity in their sense of self and life unfolding. The need to understand athletes' transition experiences in the broader context of their lives has been highlighted by a number of scholars, both in terms of their personal biographies as well as their socio-cultural locations (e.g., Stambulova, 2017). Carless and Douglas (2009) argued that "the ways career transition affects an individual is best understood in

light of earlier events in her or his life, the personal meaning of sport, and the potential impact of co-occurring transitions” (p. 52), whilst also warning that the dominant ‘performance narrative’ of elite sport could have serious implications for athletes’ mental health as it directed athletes to develop a narrow sense of self-worth contingent on athletic success. Since the life story perspective “enables us to see and identify threads and links that connect one part of a person’s life to another” (Atkinson, 2002, p.126), it is a particularly useful approach for understanding how people respond to life transitions and what sustains or threatens adaptation and well-being. For this study, the particular focus was on religion and its implications for experiences of life transitions in athletes’ developmental trajectories.

Participants

The participants of the study were selected from broader life story research that the first and the second author conducted on athletes’ career experiences in the Nordic region. Our research involved a total of 25 athletes of various nationalities who had practised their sport in the Nordic countries. The study aimed to gain a holistic understanding of these athletes and their life concerns, including religion and spirituality (if these were relevant identities for the participants). For two athletes, religion emerged as a salient aspect of who they were, and they were selected as the focus of the current comparative case study due to the richness of their stories in relation to the religious dimension of their lives.

“Vincent” (a pseudonym) is a French Canadian, Catholic, 36 years old, professional ice hockey player whose athletic career has taken him to three different continents. At the time of the interviews, Vincent was living and playing in a Nordic country for the second time in his career, while his a wife and their children were living in North America. “Lucas” (pseudonym) is a 34 years old distance runner from a Nordic country. He is a Protestant (Lutheran) Christian who had

lived in an African country in his childhood. He started running after his family's return migration and has since lived in different places while pursuing education and his athletic career. At the time of the interviews, he was competing at the national level.

Procedure

We chose a life story perspective because it offers a holistic approach that seeks to locate specific events and experiences in the participants' broader biography and their frameworks of meaning. Life story interviews generally aim to follow the interviewees' conceptions and discourse (rather than researchers' conceptual frameworks) and capture how they interpret things and events in their lives (Tagg, 1985). "Vincent" was interviewed by the 2nd author (name), and "Lucas" was interviewed by the 1st author (name). Both athletes participated in two interview sessions each lasting approximately two hours. The interviews loosely followed a chronological approach, where participants were invited to share their stories in their own preferred words, starting from sharing early childhood experiences and memories of family life, friends and school. From there, storytelling moved to educational choices, sports activities, relationships and career development in and outside of sport.

"Lucas" located his childhood story directly in a religious community where he had grown up, whereas "Vincent" only started to share stories on religion after interviewer's probe into this topic in the second interview after he had mentioned religion outside of the formal interview. However, once we asked participants to tell more about this aspect of their lives, they were articulate in reflecting on their religious backgrounds and their meaning. Therefore, we asked them to share more stories in relation to their religious beliefs, values and practices and how they felt that religion related to their sporting life projects, if at all. Participants were also invited to elaborate on various turning points in their life stories, the most challenging transition

they had experienced, and how they had adapted to different transitions in their lives. In closing, we asked the athletes to think about their future and share their hopes and aspirations. The stories included a number of transition episodes which allowed us to search for and identify patterns in how the athletes constructed meanings and reconstructed daily practices when transitioning into a new life situation.

Data analysis

After the transcriptions had been completed, we spent extensive time on analysing the athletes' stories and discussing them in research meetings. Our main analytic strategy was based on narrative analysis of structure, which seeks to identify the key structures or patterns that hold the personal stories together (Riessman, 2008; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). We sought to identify the structures of the religious identity narratives, athletic identity narratives and the more 'global' self-narratives, and how these various storylines evolved and intersected in the storytelling. As a part of the structural narrative analysis, we employed Stevenson's (1991) and Saroglou's (2011) frameworks to analytically distinguish the identity claims that were made and whether and how different dimensions of religion were integrated to athletes' narratives. Stevenson's typology of Christian athletes' identities (segregated, selective, and committed) was first employed to discern the extent of identity intersection in athletes' life narratives and how the stories surrounding their athletic and religious identities were structured. Secondly, we read the stories for identifying the presence or absence of different dimensions of religion (believing, bonding, behaving, and belonging) and how they were woven into the overall plot of the story. This involved noting aspects of actual daily practices (church attendance, sports training, family interactions, and encounters with other people) and ideational claims about personal beliefs and values.

Our second analytic interest was on discerning the performative elements of the stories – that

is, what the storytellers chose to include in their stories, what they appeared to achieve by telling these stories, and how religious identities and life transitions were constructed in the telling (Riessman, 2008). We also paid attention to how our probes and questions served to co-construct the stories. Being reflexive that the researcher is always jointly producing the telling, rather than simply hearing/receiving the participant's story, is central to the performative analysis of narrative. In the following analysis, we will show both the 'whats' (story plots and structures) and the 'hows' (the intersubjective contexts) of our participants' life stories.

Results

Since the focus our study was on understanding (1) how the athletes understood the relationship between religion and sport and (2) how these identities intersect (3) in the course of their lives, our representation of the results is a reconstruction of the chronology of participants' life stories which allows for discerning the processes associated with the first two questions. The first section addresses the stories from childhood and adolescence that first establish the storylines surrounding religion and sport. The second section considers the developmental period of late adolescence and early adulthood when identity questions and career choices become a central concern. In the final section, we analyse athletes' stories about the present and their future orientation to understand their current patterns of meaning-making and religious practice.

Religion and sport in early life: "Don't ever mix God with Sports!"

The religious dimension in Vincent's life story only becomes explicit in the second interview, which [2nd author, name] opens by saying: "So, I would like to start today by exploring with you the cultural and religious influences in your life. [Off the tape,] we talked about you being Catholic, which is why I feel free to say religious influences as well". In response, Vincent tells a story about growing up in a Catholic, "very close family" where religion was actively lived and practised. He shared memories of going to church, saying individual

206 prayers, “we thought that was important”, and talked about Christian values that shaped family
 207 life. His parents emphasised the need to acquire a good education, but ice hockey soon becomes
 208 the central part of his subjective life design and one which (alongside education) is supported by
 209 his father. However, although his father is a religious man and at the same time passionate about
 210 sport, Vincent remembers learning from a young age that sport and religion are not something to
 211 be mixed: “My dad always told me, ‘don’t ever mix God with sports’, ‘don’t ever ask God to
 212 help you on the ice – he’s got way more important things to think about than you doing good in
 213 sports’”. The way in which Vincent makes sense of his father's words is to construct sport as a
 214 fully human endeavour:

215 That [ice hockey] is something that’s me – that I decided to do, something that I enjoyed
 216 to do. And you develop a talent for that, and I don’t think God gives you that talent. I
 217 think it’s something we develop as humans – it’s more a scientific thing, I think.

218 This story structure develops early in his life story and gives shape to his career narrative in
 219 sport, which emphasises secular assets such as, personal agency, internal strength, and social
 220 support, rather than a sense of destiny, calling, or guidance. However, he equally emphasises that
 221 sport, just as life in general, has to be lived and practised with the right values – for example, the
 222 disdain for laziness (which is a Biblical theme) applies to sport, too. Again, his father is a guiding
 223 figure in shaping his moral understanding of the game:

224 My dad was a strict but a loving father... He taught you the right values, and the value of
 225 working hard, not being lazy, in life and in playing sport. [...] I was young, maybe 10-11,
 226 and I just remember him saying, in the car, [...] “I’ll tolerate you playing bad, that
 227 happens, but when you’re lazy, I will not accept it – I want you to work hard, but if you
 228 have a bad game, you have a bad game. I’ll never be mad at you for that, but don’t ever

229 be lazy, because, you know, that is cheating everybody and that's not right – it's a team
230 sport.

231 In the informal talks prior to the tape-recorded interviews, [1st author, name] had
232 mentioned to Lucas that she had studied theology and previously conducted research on
233 spirituality in sport. However, similar to Vincent, Lucas didn't quickly delve into religious or
234 spiritual themes but started by sharing his memories of family life, friendships, sport, and school.
235 However, his childhood and early adolescence took place in an explicitly religious context as his
236 parents were missionary workers and they lived in a closed religious community in an Africa
237 country. Whereas Vincent had emphasised values and practices (prayer and church-going), in
238 Lucas's narrative religion is most strongly present as the community within which he is
239 embedded. He describes his parents and his upbringing as "conservative" and recalls that sport
240 was not an important part of the shared family life. Similar to Vincent, he also constructs a
241 potential tension between belief and sport:

242 I've heard or got an impression that in some religious families the parents might ban the
243 child from taking part in sport. That belief is a spiritual thing whereas sport is only
244 physique (...) In our family, they never prohibited taking part [in sport], but in the
245 beginning, they didn't really encourage it either. It was my own choice. [And] even
246 though my father is a pastor, he has never said that sport is a bad thing.

247 The first time sport enters his story is after they had moved to an African country, where
248 "the first time I got to know the local kids was through football... through playing football we got
249 along very well". A story starts to develop where sport becomes a way for him to make a contact
250 with the new place and its people and find embodied pleasure. A turning point in his sporting
251 story is when he gets a tennis teacher at the end of primary school and starts to play regularly: "it

was a big thing. I found sport, or sport found me (...) I enjoyed the hard training”. He remembers his father being involved in building the tennis court, but other than that he constructs sport as his own and a secular thing - a storyline which becomes a central life theme. Although sport is played with people who are also members of the religious community, the meaning of sport is not explicitly connected to a religious framework.

In summary, in their early stories, both athletes constructed sport as a way of developing one’s secular talent including physical and psychological capabilities, thus separating it on a cognitive level from religion. At the same time, very different trajectories are emerging, whereas Vincent’s athletic development is shaped by a future perspective of a professional career within performance narratives of elite sport, Lucas’s sport involvement is constructed as an effortful, but yet leisurely pursuit without a ‘career’ orientation. This differentiation continues as they move into early adolescence and adulthood.

From adolescence to early adulthood: key moments in the shaping of the life course

Lucas’s family migrated back to their home country in his adolescence, which he described bluntly as “a shock”. Being separated from a closed religious community, he now starts studying in a public school where other students are different: “the others were swearing and I wasn't used to hearing that, they were disturbing the lessons. Making noise and all that what I could not understand at all”. The values of respect and good manners (including not swearing) that are part of his Christian home culture become conflicted with the secular school culture, making it difficult for him to fit in. Adaptation is challenging for him also because he is approaching a concurrent transition in his educational pathway: “I didn't know what I wanted to study and do afterwards”. In this crossroad, sport becomes an important embodied anchor to the new place that provides him with a sense of direction and inspiration: “A friend was a national level youth

275 athlete and he inspired me. I went out for some runs and was hooked. I was quite soon running
276 100 km a week”. Looking back, he chooses the initiation of his running career as the biggest
277 turning point in his life, constructing a strong link between sport and his adaptation to the
278 challenging life transition:

279 Yes, running was a way to adapt when we moved back from Africa. I always had a desire
280 to move and now I had a way to channel it. A pair of shoes and a tracksuit is all you need.
281 And through that, I could release my energy. On those runs, I was then reflecting on the
282 change and adaptation and everything that is related to it. (...) And I got a couple of
283 friends through running.

284 The immersion into the competitive running culture through his friend, however, also introduces
285 him to performance narratives of sport which had not been a part of his lifeworld pre-migration.
286 As he recalls:

287 I was so green, I knew nothing about high-performance sports. About seconds or
288 anything. Two minutes in 800 metres, good or bad time, I didn’t know. I didn’t even
289 know that many distance runners come from African countries, having lived there myself.
290 Although being introduced to the performance dimension of sport and embracing the desire to
291 test out his athletic potential, his embodied experiences and narrative resources allow him to
292 resist the monological stories of running as *only* minutes and seconds. He stories his resistance as
293 a result of his maturity (through becoming immersed in competitive sport only in late
294 adolescence). However, from then on, competitive running becomes his central life theme
295 carrying through studies in a community college in another city, then moving again, starting
296 university studies, and going to a student exchange in another European country. At the same
297 time, being an athlete and living an athletes’ life with early morning runs fits his family norms

298 and their Christian lifestyle whereas partying and alcohol consumption was something frowned
299 upon: “My parents still don’t really approve of alcohol at all (...) I had my first beer sometime in
300 my exchange year”. He talks about conflicts that some religious adolescents may face by
301 “missing out” from “normal” adolescent activities but reflects that sport has helped him in this
302 regard: “it [the sport] has given perspective and I’ve got friends through sport. Before [starting
303 running], all my friends were from the religious community. So I learned that they are also
304 normal people, the non-religious ones”.

305 Vincent’s life trajectory becomes shaped by elite sport development from a young age, and
306 he soon starts to design his life around the professionalised athletic career narrative. His parents
307 approve his trajectory to an extent that it can even override the family’s religious practices. As he
308 recalls:

309 We went to church almost every Sunday until I can remember. The only time we stopped
310 going was when my hockey got more and more serious and I was playing and I was away,
311 so there was less and less time at the church.

312 At the age of 16, he gets an opportunity to move to another city to play in a league which is
313 heavily scouted by universities, and soon gets a contract to play and study in a US university. For
314 him, the choice to pursue a dual career track at university, rather than a hockey-only pathway, is
315 constructed solely as a way to fulfil his parents’ expectations on receiving a good education,
316 rather than a personal ambition. This relational narrative – emphasising the family (religious)
317 values and closeness – shapes his story of transitioning into young adulthood:

318 I just think that whole, growing up like that, just kept us really close as a family and made
319 us feel how family values are important. I left at a young age and I know it was hard on my
320 mom. It was hard [also] on me, but me, I’m a young man and living my life, starting my

young adult life, but for my mom, it was hard for her kids to go away from the nest. I felt there was more of a trying to make sure I'm – they're still important in my life.

Elsewhere, Lucas's narrative of young adulthood continues with growing independence and settling to live on his own. He continues to pursue sport with a personal coach and develops many friendships through running, in which he reaches the top national level. His educational and professional development is somewhat bumpy with short-term contracts, a period of unemployment and a return to study in the university, but the running life project provides him with a stable structure and meaningful goals. Living on his own, he doesn't attend the mass regularly but doesn't think that this has influenced his personal beliefs in any way. Although he has predominantly separated religion from sport in terms of beliefs and practices, he mentions that recently he has actually brought his sport to the church:

Sometimes when I have important competitions, for example, I might go to the church, to get strength and a kind of peace of mind. And if I had a good competition I might go to the church next Sunday, a little bit like to thank God for it.

After telling his story up to date, [1st author, name] seeks to inquire how he thinks about religious influences in the bigger picture of his sport involvement. Although he sees religion as an important aspect of how he generally views the world, including optimism and hope for the future, he is hesitant to make very definite links between religion and sport. For example, he doesn't emotionally relate to accounts of running is a mystical or transcendent experience:

“running is 90% work. The kind of spiritualism, it is too far from the reality”. [1st author, name] also tells that another research participant has shared a story of a father telling him “not to mix God with sports”, to which he responds:

[It can be seen that] religion is a spiritual thing and sport is only physique (...) and so the

physique does not make a person any better or it doesn't bring you any closer to heaven, whereas if you develop yourself spiritually... So this theme is related to Christianity.

For Vincent, the pursuit of a professional athletic career leads him to navigate numerous sport-related relocations whilst trying to sustain close family relationships. He experiences some setbacks including a severe injury which leaves him out of contract and forces him to look for opportunities to play outside the prestigious National Hockey League (NHL, top ice hockey league of North America). The tensions between complex family life and the transnational ice hockey career become continue shaping his stories up to the present situation. He feels that his parents have never really supported his marriage, and her child from a previous marriage brings another tension when they are seeking to arrange their family life across borders. His most difficult life transition is moving to Russia to play for a season while his family stays behind: “that was the hardest, hardest thing I’ve ever done”.

Vincent talks extensively about challenges in his private life. He also mentions being increasingly removed from the religious community due to his professional pathway, explaining that “with my job and being gone and, I play Sundays, I don’t have Sundays off, so we don’t go to church that much”. Religious practices are furthermore not central to his wife who has been, for some years, taking care of the children while Vincent is abroad playing hockey. Although religious values are part of how he hopes to bring up their children, other dimensions of the religious experience appear to be largely missing.

Vincent’s narrative construction of sport is ambiguous, as he once says he loves what he does, but on other occasions describes it simply as a way of making a living: “it’s my job, but it’s not the most important thing in my life”. He talks about separating sport life and private life, not letting situations on the ice affect the home life and vice versa. At the same time, the sporting

367 successes and failures have a strong impact on him, but he tends to keep his feelings to himself.

368 After hearing the life story up to the present situation, [2nd author, name] asks him to reflect on
369 the relationship between his religious life and sport:

370 [2nd author, name]: I'm wondering if you have experienced (...) religious influence in
371 your sport at all? Like, whether that was or has been a factor in your career, in any way.

372 Vincent: Religiously, I don't think so. I don't think I can relate religiously to what I do
373 now. I think the only way I can relate is like I said, things that you learn how to be as a
374 human being that has helped me through my career. But also I think it's also not helped
375 me because you know the expression "good guys come last"? When you're in this kind of
376 business in a high, high level, I've always experienced that if you're a good guy and you
377 go along, most of the time it doesn't work (...) I've seen guys that are not good people at
378 all, that have – maybe didn't deserve, as a human being, to get any kind of chance, and
379 maybe even their talent wasn't – but for some reason [they did it]. Maybe their arrogance,
380 showing an air of confidence, and it just – better talkers, knew better how to be – better
381 communicators with their higher-ups, their coaches.

382 For Vincent, the Christian values of justice, humility and being 'a good person' appear
383 contradictory to the nature of elite sport and his observation that it could be arrogance and
384 (over)confidence that brought success. However, throughout the interviews, he maintains that he
385 has not segregated religious and sporting values, even if he has observed that that is how the elite
386 sport world seems to work sometimes. He then explains that when he came to a Nordic country,
387 he had finally found a team where the culture is congruent with his (Christian) values of being a
388 hard worker and a good person:

389 I fit in so well. I'm more reserved and I rely on my hard work, and being team player, and

that's what I love about here. There's no BS and it's straightforward – you're a hard worker and a good person – that's the culture that's here. (...) This is the only place where I've said in the past that I feel comfortable with the kind of team and the principles that I admire – that I want to be part of.

In summary, although the participants' stories shift as they search for their place in the sport world and the broader society, both athletes continue constructing a life story where their religion forms a ground of being shaping their values and basic attitudes towards sport life. Both athletes construct their life paths strongly around the athletic career trajectory albeit in very different institutional settings (professional vs amateur). However, both start to become distanced from religious practices and communities in the course of multiple (developmental, cultural, athletic) life transitions, developing stories of a more individualised, private religion.

From the present towards anticipated futures

Being mature athletes approaching their final years in the peak phase of elite athletic career, both athletes are reflective of the anticipated, or at least socially expected retirement from the elite sport. In his mid-30s, Lucas is acutely aware of the deviant trajectory that his life is following and seeks to justify this:

My brother is married and has two children, whereas I'm single and live alone. Well, I bought my own apartment and I'm building my life that way. But I don't have a family(...) We talk about the contemporary society that is it diverse and there doesn't need to be just one way. Being aware of that helps. Also many others, like individual athletes.

He also mentions his parents' traditional views on life, and how "they have asked me many times when I am going to retire [from sport], start living a normal life... and so I have had to justify myself, prove that I can take care of things even if I train twice a day". Aware of the normative

life scripts of adulthood and the possibility that he might have passed his athletic peak, he has explored his own motives and meaning of running. The early sporting experiences disconnected from the dominant performance narrative provide him with narrative resources to construct the joy of sport as his key life theme, and he continues to pursue his athletic life project with the entry into Veteran athletics in sight: “it is not too long before I can compete in the over 50 category (laughing)”. He also says that if he finds a life partner, she needs to accept that running is important for him: “I can do it less, but to stop doing something that I’ve enjoyed to do for such a long time...” Interactions with the Veteran athletes in his club provide him with further exemplary stories of how sport can be an integral aspect of life also in the future. He views his hope for a bright future in his sport life project, possibly as a Veteran athlete, as a part of his religious worldview: “the best is still ahead, that is also a religious understanding”.

Meanwhile, Vincent’s life design is shaped by an anticipated disengagement from the sport-work: “I’m not going to do this for the rest of my life, so I [need to] think what’s in the rest of your life – your wife, kids, that’s who you want [to be], that takes a priority on anything else.” He doesn’t have a contract for the next season, which he sees that as a good opportunity to “take a time out” and analyse his life. He repeatedly states that his family is the priority and looks forward to being closer to them. He also has an idea for working as some kind of cultural consultant in sport, helping transnational athletes in adaptation to new teams in new cultural locations. However, religiosity is largely absent from his future perspective and he does not talk about reintegration to a religious community – perhaps because his wife doesn’t share his Catholic beliefs and practices. He talks about still believing, but:

As you get older (...) you start becoming your own person and you start seeing things different ways sometimes, and you’re exposed to more things. I feel like there is a God,

there is an afterlife, but I feel you're in control of your destiny.

In summary, both athletes think about their current lives and futures within an increasingly individualised framework of spirituality which is grounded on Christian values and fundamental beliefs about the world but doesn't rely on active communal practices.

Discussion

Through in-depth life story interviews, we sought to understand how religion and sport intersect in Christian elite athletes' life narratives. In relation to Saroglou's (2011) dimensions of religion (believing, behaving, bonding, and belonging) and Stevenson's (1991) typology of Christian athletes (segregated, selective, and committed), we traced multiple ways in which athletes talked about religion and how it impacted their journeys in sport. First, throughout their life narratives, athletes largely separated religion from sport on the levels of believing, bonding, and belonging. In contrast to previous studies (see Balague, 1999; Mosley et al., 2015), the Christian athletes did not indicate that they felt God had given them the athletic talent or vocation to play sport. Instead, they were narrating sport development primarily as a secular, human endeavour and did not construct injuries or setbacks a part of God's bigger plan (in contrast to Grindstaff et al., 2010). Although Stevenson (1991) suggested that often the segregated athletes simply did not know how to integrate their sport and religion, the participants in the study were articulate in explaining why they thought that sport should be primarily understood as a secular activity. This illustrates the diversity of interpretations that can be made of the Christian doctrine in relation to the body and sports (Scarpa & Carraro 2011) and provides a different account from the most often reported integrative views where religious beliefs shape meanings athletes assign to sport practices (e.g., Mosley et al., 2015). These findings can be partly explained by the difference in theological positions that Christian churches adopt on religion and sport that tend to fluctuate over time dependent on cultural

locations and traditions of specific denominations (McGrath, 2008). For example, despite visible examples of sport and religion interface such as sport chaplaincy, some Christian church leaders continue to see sport as something that potentially counters spiritual development (Parker & Watson, 2014). These findings highlight the diversity of interpretations within Christianity when it comes to the meaning and value of sport practices.

In terms of bonding (i.e., religious practices to connect with the transcendent), Vincent again expressed segregated views, (“don’t ever ask God to help you on the ice”) whereas Lucas’s account was more selective and ambiguous. Although a link between religious practices (going to Church and prayer) and sporting life is absent from his childhood narratives, it later emerges and marks a potential shift in his relationship with God in his adulthood. Yet, he rejects a relatively new popular discourse of distance running as spiritual activity (e.g., Simpson, Post, Young, & Jensen, 2014), which could indicate that such discourses might not resonate so well with athletes with a more traditional religious worldview.

Despite the segregated and selective elements in the storytelling, the athletes also consistently constructed a story aligned with the committed type in relation to Christian values in sport. They emphasised the importance of Christian values and virtues in their lives in and outside of sport (e.g., work ethic, justice, respect, hope), clearly indicating that they thought God cared about how they conduct themselves in sport life (i.e., God separates the person from the activity). Although the athletes were aware that sometimes “the good guy” might not get rewarded for their ethical behaviour in sport, the strong dissonance between their Christian values and the moral code of sport described by Stevenson (1991) was absent from their stories. This highlights that although some athletes might think it is not appropriate to “mix God with sports”, religion could still have an influence on their sport lives that matters for their career

development and well-being.

In the journeys through multiple life transitions, the stories involved a common temporal pattern where athletes started to become distanced from communal religion. This movement was influenced by sport (i.e., making non-religious friends through sport for Lucas and prioritising hockey over churchgoing for Vincent) and also reflects the broader cultural shift where traditional church practices are losing their grip especially on the younger generations (Davie, 2007). Although the athletes expressed agency in moving towards a more individualised form of religiosity, the requirements to compete on Sundays and relocate to secure employability (for Vincent) also forced a separation from active religious practices and communities. Furthermore, narratively reframing religion as a personal and inner dimension could be a part of their cultural adaptation to the secular Nordic societies. That is, although the religious landscape in the Nordic countries has become more complex with multi-culturalism and new forms of spirituality emerging, religion has been predominantly considered a private and individual issue (Bäckström, 2014). As Saroglou (2011) observed, in highly secularised societies, religion is often thought more like an intrinsic attitude whereas extrinsic religion (of collective practices) is less relevant. Athletes' stories about individualised religion align well with the cultural context where they were embedded in and could be seen as part of the meaning reconstruction that forms a vital aspect of cultural transition (Ryba, Stambulova, & Ronkainen, 2016). While the athletes themselves maintained that their belief has been sustained with certain modifications without active religious practices, scholars have raised questions about possibilities of 'believing without belonging', arguing that "the passivity of so-called 'believers' is itself a sign of religious decline" (Voas & Crockett, 2005, p. 24). This said it is evident that religion continued to influence participants' lives in the form of basic assumptions

about the world, personal values, and deep-held religious cultural expectations.

From a narrative perspective, a life story is never a pure reflection of inner life, but a relational construction shaped by the intended audience(s) and the immediate intersubjective context (McAdams, 2008; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). It is likely that the participants (especially Vincent) would have only briefly discussed religion, if at all, without the interviewer introducing the topic. Blodgett et al. (2017) suggested that the sport culture applies a “don’t ask, don’t tell” norm in relation to religion, and therefore athletes may hesitate to discuss their religion in a sports-related context. It is likely that the increasingly secularised context with the cultural norm of religion as a private issue had further prevented athletes from discussing their faith in a sport-related situation. Vincent told [2nd author, name] that no one had ever asked him this kind of questions, indicating that religion was omitted from his public life as an athlete. Our participants had grown up in very traditional Christian families and were clearly outliers to the dominant norm of secularised cultural Christianity in the Nordic context (Zuckerman, 2009); thus, they were likely to be aware that certain religious expressions may not be well received by people in the national cultural contexts in which they were embedded. However, once the interviewers had shown empathetic interest in how religion manifests in their lives, athletes were willing to discuss their views and experiences.

As the case study has illustrated, athletes have individual and unique ways of bringing religion into their sport life, and it is important that applied practitioners are aware of this diversity. As Andersen (1993) reminded us, variance is always large within any cultural group, and we may easily become “sensitive stereotypers” rather than “sensitive” on a truly individual basis. If athletes choose to bring their religion into discussions with the applied sport psychology practitioners, it is essential that the practitioners seek to suspend their assumptions

about that particular religion and demonstrate positive regard and respect to their clients' worldviews (Sarkar et al., 2015). For this to take place, it is important that practitioners are self-reflective about their own attitudes towards religion and how they shape their interactions with the client. In the psychological literature, religion is sometimes considered merely as a defence mechanism (Pargament, 2011) and religion has become increasingly associated with the traditional, institutional and "bad" (Pargament, 1999), which in turn can influence the ways in which sport psychology practitioners think about religion. Furthermore, there is a need to understand the cultural contexts which will influence whether any topic becomes expressed or silenced. Although some athletes might not readily introduce religion as a topic of discussion, it does not imply that it might not be an important aspect of their lives.

As a limitation of the present study, the interviews were conducted with the aim of eliciting broad life stories and not specifically focused on religion. However, the fact that the participants were prepared to talk about their religious beliefs and practices indicates that they were important for them. We acknowledge that other cultural identities (of gender, ethnicity, etc.) intersect in athletes' life narratives to shape their religious experience, but other intersecting identities were not analysed in the current study; however, it should be remembered that the results reflect the stories of two white males. Finally, our study revealed important differences to previous studies on Christian athletes' experiences in sport (e.g., Balague, 1999; Grindstaff et al., 2010; Mosley et al., 2015), highlighting diversity within the identity 'category' of a Christian athlete. In future work, it will be valuable to conduct research in various cultural locations and with more diverse participants to extend our understandings of the role of religion in athletes' lives.

Conclusions

The present study sought to explore the role of religion in Christian elite athletes' life transitions and life journeys. In contrast to many previous findings on religious meaning-making in sport, the athletes narratively separated religious belief from sport practice and constructed sport as a secular life project. In the athletes' stories, however, religion's role was the most prominent as a source of values (that also apply in sport) and basic world assumptions and that were largely sustained through various life transitions. Through performative narrative analysis, we also illustrated the tensions in expressing the religious dimension of the life-world in a secularised cultural context, which has important implications for the applied practitioner working with religious athletes. An awareness of the potential importance of the religious and/or spiritual dimension, even if it might not be immediately expressed, is important for researchers and practitioners when seeking to develop a truly holistic understanding of the athlete.

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