The Trouble With Tebowing
Grace Yukich, Kimberly Stokes and Daniela Bellows

*Contexts* 2014 13: 50
DOI: 10.1177/1536504214533500

The online version of this article can be found at: http://ctx.sagepub.com/content/13/2/50

Published by:

http://www.sagepublications.com

On behalf of:

American Sociological Association

Additional services and information for *Contexts* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://ctx.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://ctx.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

>> Version of Record - May 20, 2014

What is This?
the trouble with tebowing

by grace yukich, kimberly stokes, and daniela bellows

It is 20 seconds until kickoff. Thousands of Denver Broncos fans fill the stadium, creating a waving sea of orange and blue. On the field, a lone figure bends down on one knee on the sideline. “Put a wall of protection around me and my teammates today,” he says aloud. “That we go out there and get on to you with everything we do and say. I love you. In Jesus’s name, Amen.” He rises, puts on his helmet, and heads to the sideline to join his teammates, his ritual “tebowing” complete.

In 2011, NFL quarterback Tim Tebow led the Broncos in a comeback win over the Miami Dolphins, throwing two touchdown passes and a two-point conversion with less than three minutes left in the game. One Broncos fan was so inspired by the win that he started the website Tebowing.com, a tribute to Tebow and his characteristic pose. The website became a phenomenon, with people posting photos of themselves “tebowing” on mountaintops, on the Great Wall of China—even on horseback.

From the time he first became a football star to the moment he was cut from the New York Jets and the New England Patriots, Tebow elicited both admiration and revulsion. Some criticized his failures on the field, while others seemed primarily annoyed by his public, unabashed Christianity. He is hardly the first athlete to thank Jesus after the end of a football game. (A 2011 headline in The Onion mockingly proclaimed: “Tim Tebow Becomes First Christian to Play in NFL.”) Why did Tebow’s religiosity—and not Lin’s—seem to rub so many journalists the wrong way? What can this tell us about attitudes toward religion and sports and the boundaries between religion and public life?

To find out, we compared New York Times coverage of Tim Tebow and Jeremy Lin over a three-year period—2009 to 2012. When we searched the newspaper’s online database, focusing on stories that covered their Christianity, we found that Tebow’s religiosity made commentators uncomfortable because he displayed it in ways that highlighted divisions among sports fans, and Americans in general, rather than celebrating their solidarity. It turns out that the boundary between religion and sports is flexible—except when it comes to playtime.

While other professional athletes are also public about their Christianity, rarely has their religiosity elicited so much media scrutiny.
businesses. Similarly, the rising popularity of sporting institutions such as football and basketball teams in the United States was intimately tied to the rise of the evangelical Protestant tradition during the nineteenth century, as documented by religious historians such as Clifford Putney. Some Christians began to see sports as a way to celebrate “God-given masculinity” and combat the evils of the flesh. For these Christians, the battle for victory on the field or the court mirrored battles to resist temptation and overcome evil facing every Christian.

Playing sports was more than physical exercise: it offered spiritual training as well. Evangelical Protestant traditions and sports became so intertwined that observers began referring to their combination as “muscular Christianity.” Groups such as the Fellowship of Christian Athletes formed in the mid-twentieth century in order to strengthen the ties between religion and sports.

More recently, however, some commentators have depicted sports and religion as being at odds with one another. In his 2012 piece, “The Jeremy Lin Problem,” New York Times columnist David Brooks argued that sports and religion have contradictory purposes: the former seeks mastery while the latter cultivates humility. The rise of professional sporting leagues, huge players’ salaries, and sports branding may have the effect of further secularizing the sporting sphere. This follows on the heels of broader processes of secularization during the twentieth century, a period of religious “disestablishment” chronicled by sociologists of religion like Robert Wuthnow.

But while sports has become more divorced from religious influence at the institutional level, fans continue to witness individual players expressing religious identities. The post-game interview opening phrase, “I want to thank my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,” has become almost as ubiquitous as the concluding phrase “God bless America” in political speeches.

Some commentators complain about any mention of religion in relation to sports, arguing that religion should be private, or even that it is inherently opposed to sports. Others think religious displays are just what sports needs, potentially softening an often violent, ego-driven sports culture. But most observers fall somewhere in between, condoning some types of religious displays and criticizing others.

The boundary between religion and sports is flexible—except when it comes to playtime.

playing for jesus

While some spectators will find themselves alienated by any religious expressions on the part of athletes, the more specific the expression, the more people feel excluded. According to the 2008 Pew Religious Landscape Survey, one in four Americans are not Christian (and three out of four Americans are not evangelical Christians). Players’ specific references to “savior,” “Jesus,” or “Christ”—language especially associated with evangelical Christianity—highlight cultural divisions that have the potential to be temporarily erased, or at least downplayed, in the sporting arena.

Analyzing articles reporting on Tebow’s and Lin’s religiosity, we found that coverage of Tebow’s public religious displays more often contained Christocentric content compared with Lin’s reported displays, which were more generally religious. While two-thirds of Lin’s reported expressions had Christocentric elements, almost 85 percent of Tebow’s religious expressions referred specifically to Jesus, Christ, or Christianity (25 out of 30 articles).

Further, in a 2012 New York Times article (“Lin’s Appeal: Faith, Pride and Points”), Michael Luo characterized Lin’s faith as “deeply personal” and “nuanced,” noting that, unlike Tebow, he is not a “cultural warrior.” Luo refers to Tebow’s public support for conservative religio-political positions, represented by his appearance in a 2010 anti-abortion ad aired during the Super Bowl.
Bowl, sponsored by the conservative religious group Focus on the Family. Tebow’s association with the Christian right—a cultural and political minority often perceived as religiously and politically divisive—contributes to his image in the media as a disruptive, rather than uniting, figure.

A 2009 New York Times piece (“Questioning Sports Evangelism”) quoted USA Today reporter Tom Krattenmaker, who argued that Tebow is “leveraging sports’ popularity to promote a message and doctrine that are out of sync with the diverse communities that support franchises, and with the unifying civic role that we expect of our teams.” In other words, by sometimes mentioning “God” rather than “Jesus” and by avoiding public involvement in larger religio-political controversies, Lin’s religious displays are more unifying and appeal to a wider audience. Tebow’s expressions, in contrast, remind fans of their divisions rather than their shared love of the game. In Krattenmaker’s view, this makes it more difficult for a religiously diverse group of fans to build a sporting community that bridges differences, which could extend to bridging difference in other areas of civic life as well.

the purity of playtime

While Christianity has never been a “white” religion demographically, the theologies and religious practices of whites, both in the United States and Europe, have defined the norms of Christianity for the last several centuries. Sociologist Korie Edwards, among others, suggests that even in multiracial churches, white religious traditions often retain dominance over the religious traditions of other racial and ethnic groups. This continued white dominance may explain why Tebow’s religiosity received more media focus than religious displays by athletes of color; Tebow’s whiteness makes his religiosity “count more” in debates over what religion should look like.

Paradoxically, white dominance may also explain why Tebow received more negative attention than Lin. Understandings of the appropriateness of religious displays varies according to players’ racial and ethnic backgrounds. As Korie Edwards and others have shown, African American Christian traditions are associated with vocal, expressive religious practices, while white Christian traditions are associated with quieter, more restrained religious practices—much like Asian American Christian traditions. In engaging in public religious displays, black athletes are fulfilling cultural expectations of their racialized religious identities, while white athletes who engage in similarly public or vocal displays challenge cultural expectations.

While African American athletes’ religiosity can be dismissed as “just cultural” and therefore acceptable in the sporting sphere, it may be more difficult to brush aside the religious displays of white athletes; they may therefore be interpreted as “purely” religious rather than cultural. Since Jeremy Lin’s reported religious displays were less frequent and less public than Tim Tebow’s, Lin’s displays affirmed rather than challenged prevailing cultural stereotypes about Asian American Christianity. Commentators could depict Lin’s displays as cultural rather than purely religious, portraying them as less of a challenge to the boundary separating religion and sports.

Not only do we tend to interpret athletes’ religious displays in racialized ways, but the specific times and places in which those displays occur make a difference. Writing for The New York Times in 2011 (“Tim Tebow, and Keeping Religion Out of Football”), Toni Monkovic argues, “The Tim Tebow success story, puzzling to some and entertaining to most, seems to have one obvious drawback: the injection of religion. Or more specifically arguing over religion. But arguing about religion—who needs it?” This implies that many members of the media, and perhaps fans as well, do not find players’ religiosity problematic.
When athletes mention Jesus during a game, they disrupt camaraderie, making religious differences salient rather than allowing them to temporarily fade into the background.

or offensive. Rather, it is the “injection” of religious displays into areas where they are perceived to distract from the purpose at hand that incites the wrath of commentators.

Similarly, in a 2011 piece (“Tim Tebow’s Gospel of Optimism”), columnist Frank Bruni likened Tebow’s behavior during games to “a sort of self-righteous bait-and-switch—you come for scrimmages and he subjects you to scriptures.” Once the game is over and the score is final, religious displays may be appropriate. When players, in post-game interviews, thank God for the joy that comes with winning (or the strength to keep going after a tough loss), they avoid subjecting fans to religion, when many fans—and media commentators—want to focus on the athleticism and excitement of the game. As NFL player Patrick Toomay told a reporter in 2012 (“Cultural Conflicts, Playing Out on the Football Field,”): “On the field, it’s all so direct. There’s passion, there’s blood, there’s fear. You have people who can transcend themselves heroically and do marvelous, beautiful things in that ritual cup. It touches the dynamic of the larger culture.” Thanking God off the playing field in the locker room is fine, but once a player steps into the sporting arena, it is a time for people to come together to celebrate human achievement, where the winner of the game is based not on a higher power but on the strength and drive of athletes.

In articles reporting on Tebow’s and Lin’s religiosity, rarely were Lin’s religious displays reported as occurring during the game (only one out of 12 articles). Lin’s displays did not disrupt the flow of layups and dunks, passes and blocks. Lin could have expressed his Christian identity by making the sign of the cross or pointing at the sky after a basket, by kneeling on the sidelines, or through other playtime religious displays. Instead, Lin mostly restricted his expressions to before or after the game, during pre- and post-game interviews, for example, according to press reports. In comparison, over half of Tebow’s reported religious displays were on the field or the sidelines, during the game. Tebow, unlike Lin, injected religion into playtime, and according to the press, this was a bad thing.

As a professional athlete, Tebow has been depicted primarily as expressing his religiosity through “tebowing” on the sidelines during games, but he has long engaged in religious displays during playtime. As a college quarterback at the University of Florida, Tebow was well-known for displaying scripture references in his eye blacks, a constant visual reminder during the game of his religiosity in general and his Christianity in particular. Indeed, this practice was so highlighted and debated in covering Tebow as a college player that the NFL made these practices prohibited for its players. By engaging in these practices during games, Tebow required that all spectators observe his religious displays, breaking up the focus on the excitement and athleticism of the game itself. When fans are distracted from the game, it makes it harder for them to experience the solidarity-building collective effervescence that occasionally occurs as part of the experience of shared fandom.

making the secular sacred

Americans love sports. They come to games to cheer on their teams, joining with others in rituals of collective effervescence.
that bind them together, however briefly, in the joys of athleticism, competition, and victory. More than practically any other current pastime, sports offer the chance for people to temporarily overcome the boundaries that usually separate them, celebrating the bond that is formed when total strangers spontaneously hug or high five each other following a touchdown. When athletes mention Jesus during a game, they disrupt that camaraderie, making religious differences salient rather than allowing them to temporarily fade into the background.

So while much of the media coverage of Tim Tebow’s religiosity has been positive, it has been more negative than comparable coverage of Jeremy Lin, another evangelical athlete. This is for at least two reasons: Tebow’s religious expressions were more divisive (Christocentric and/or political) and more disruptive of playtime (they counter racial expectations and draw focus from the game). Most commentators who voice opposition to Tebow do not oppose his religion itself. Instead, they dislike his insertion of disruptive religious displays into a time and place that members of the media as well as many fans see, in a Durkheimian sense, as sacred: as pure and set apart from everyday life.

In taking a knee on the sidelines, many Americans believe that Tebow distracts observers from focusing on the rituals of the game itself and its celebration of the human body and spirit. Many commentators (and very likely fans as well) do not want to give up the potentially unifying characteristics of the sporting space, especially since so few other such spaces exist in the United States today.

Social theorist Jürgen Habermas has argued that societies should allow religious language to permeate public life while preserving specific spaces, such as the halls of Congress, as free from religious expression. By preserving certain spaces as secular, politicians might find it easier to work together across religious lines, temporarily focusing on the task of lawmaking while allowing for public religio-political expression outside of those spaces. In a similar way, media commentators, in covering Tebow and Lin, constructed a cultural narrative of sports fandom that while sanctioning religiosity in sports at certain moments, calls upon us to make the sporting arena a unifying space where we can momentarily cheer for a team—and build social bonds—without being distracted by our differences.

recommended resources

Edwards, Korie. The Elusive Dream: The Power of Race in Interracial Churches (Oxford University Press, 2008). An ethnographic study demonstrating how traditionally white religious practices become dominant in interracial churches, even ones that are majority African American, due in part to the unwillingness of many whites to attend services where nonwhite religious practices predominate.


Mendieta, Eduardo and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (eds.). The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere (Columbia University Press, 2011). This edited volume includes several essays by well-known political and social theorists, including Jürgen Habermas, on the changing role of religion in the public sphere.

Putnam, Robert D. and David E. Campbell. American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us (Simon & Schuster, 2010). This book presents current statistical research on many aspects of religion in the United States, including which religious groups are most stigmatized and how that is changing.


Grace Yukich is in the sociology department at Quinnipiac University. She is the author of One Family Under God: Immigration Politics and Progressive Religion in America. Kimberly Stokes is in the law school at Quinnipiac University. She studies the media, civil rights, and mediation. Daniela Bellows is in the sociology department at Quinnipiac University. She studies religion, law, and sociology of the family.