



Christian Enthusiasm: Can the Olympic Flame Kindle the Fire of Christianity?

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“**F**an into flame the gift of God!” sounds Paul’s appeal in 2 Tim 1:6. This advice has a particularly urgent ring in times when the flame of Christian enthusiasm seems to have lost much of its fervor, and many Christians look at the unquenched enthusiasm of the world for an example worth following. Fascination and enthusiasm are readily associated with many things in the world; some have even claimed that essentially *all* of existence can become an object of human fascination.¹ Nonetheless, many find it extremely difficult to be fascinated by Christian theology and ministry. At various times throughout history, individuals and groups have tried to revive a genuine Christian fascination, but with it have earned rather unflattering descriptions of being “sensual,” “ecstatic,” “aggressive,” “fanatic,” or even “satanic.”² Even so, voices have increased that call for more enthusiasm and fascination in Christian theology and ministry.

¹Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961) 63; Heribert Mühlen, *Entsakralisierung* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1971) 20-65, 130.

²See, e.g., Horace S. Ward, “The Anti-Pentecostal Argument,” in *Aspects of Pentecostal-Charismatic Origins*, ed. Vinson Synan (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1975) 99-122.

As the epitome of sport, the Olympic Games model a kind of “religious” enthusiasm that has massive and magic appeal. Closer examination, however, reveals overwhelming difference between the enthusiasm of the Olympiad and the enthusiasm of the Spirit—a difference that is essential to the Christian gospel.

Secular enthusiasm finds particular expression at mass sports events and other sports activities that are consistently found at the top of the list of things most people enjoy. Curiously, even though ecstatic spectators have proven to be at times aggressive or fanatic, no one has dared label those audiences “devilish” or “satanic.” Can the thought and worship of God excite a human person to the same extent as watching a thrilling sporting event? Interestingly, the revival of a genuine Christian enthusiasm in the last century coincided with the reestablishment of one of the greatest sports events in history: the Olympic Games. In 1896, Pierre de Coubertin revived the ancient games with the motto “Faster! Higher! Stronger!”³ The twentieth century experienced a fascination with this motto and the world of sports at large—fueled by the record-breaking promises of ever faster, higher, and stronger athletes—that is rivaled only by the promises of the technological revolution. Can the Olympic torch perhaps also kindle the fire of Christianity? In other words, does the spirit of secular enthusiasm offer the promise of a faster, higher, and stronger church?

THE RELIGIOUS CHARACTER OF THE OLYMPIC GAMES

From their inception, the Olympic Games were surrounded by stories of the divine. Whether the games originated with the wrestling of the deities of the sky with the gods of the earth, or with Herakles (Hercules) who instituted the first games in honor of Zeus, or King Iphitos of Elis, who restored the games following the advice of the Delphic Oracle,⁴ the ancient Greek games were in one way or another an expression of human admiration of the gods. Thus, the Pythian games were held in honor of Apollo, the Isthmian games for Poseidon, and the Nemean games, like the Olympic games, in honor of Zeus. As Judith Swaddling observed, “The god was believed to bestow on the athletes the physical prowess which enabled them to take part in the Games. Accordingly, the athletes prayed to the deity and promised offerings should they be victorious.”⁵ The spirit of the ancient games was truly captured by the original Greek word “enthusiasm,” that is, *en-theos*, “being-in-god” or “possessed by a god.” The enthusiasm of the games had many faces, be it the fascination with the athletic body as manifested in Greek art and literature, or the Roman sense for victories, professionalism, and commercialism.⁶ The rather brutal enthusiasm of the Romans, however, transformed the character of the Olympic Games into such a violent spectacle that Christian emperor Theodosius I put an end to them in 394 A.D.⁷

³This motto originated with Dominican priest Henri Didon (1840-1900). See Pierre de Coubertin, *Olympism: Selected Writings*, ed. Norbert Müller (Lausanne: International Olympic Committee, 2000) 210.

⁴See Judith Swaddling, *The Ancient Olympic Games* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984) 9; Ernst A. Bland, *Olympic Story* (London: Rockliff, 1948) 15; Carl Diem, *Ewiges Olympia: Quellen zum olympischen Gedanken* (Minden: August Lutzeyer, 1948) 23-29.

⁵Swaddling, *Ancient Olympic Games*, 12.

⁶Bland, *Olympic Story*, 18.

⁷*Ibid.*, 14.

The religious spark of Olympic enthusiasm was rekindled only in 1896, largely due to the efforts of Pierre de Coubertin, who was well aware of the fact that “it was excess that in the end ruined and corrupted ancient athleticism.”⁸ After a long period of war and depression, Coubertin thought that he had found universal appeal in the apparent religious message of hope and joy sparked by the Olympic Games, and he dedicated his entire life to their reestablishment. “Delphi and Eleusis were only sanctuaries,” he explained; “Thermopylae immortalized the names of heroes; the Acropolis retells the story of a great city; but Olympia symbolizes an entire civilization, superior to cities, military heroes, and the ancient religions.”⁹ Much of this superiority was due to the quasi-divine status of the athlete; after all, it was the athlete “whose statue is erected in the avenues, he whose name is inscribed upon the marbles, he whose native town greeted him on his return with triumphal entrance through a breach in the walls. Folly!” Coubertin exclaimed. “Frivolous enthusiasm!”¹⁰

In 1935, Coubertin elucidated his understanding of the religious character of the modern games with the following comparison to antiquity:

The primary, fundamental characteristic of ancient Olympism, and of modern Olympism as well, is that it is a *religion*. By chiseling his body through exercise as a sculptor does a statue, the ancient athlete “honored the gods.” In doing likewise, the modern athlete honors his country, his race, and his flag. Therefore, I believe I was right to restore, from the very beginning of modern Olympism, a religious sentiment transformed and expanded by the internationalism and democracy that are distinguishing features of our day. Yet this is the same religious sentiment that led the young Hellenes, eager for the victory of their muscles, to the foot of the altars of Zeus.¹¹

The religious feeling revived was, of course, that of Western Christendom rather than the mythical character of the ancient Greek games. Consequently, Coubertin’s German friend, Carl Diem, observed:

It is no longer an attempt to honor Zeus, but everything that happens stands upon a pious faith: to fulfill a divine will in the secret meaning of the festive game, and to stand with this meaning of the game in the meaning of the world: to be human, to be fully human.... Thus, the consecration of the Games presents itself throughout time, and even today’s strangers to sports, who experience such a celebration, are captured by its magic. They really are the eternal festival of human civilization.¹²

⁸Coubertin, *Olympism*, 543; see also Bill Henry, *An Approved History of the Olympic Games* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1948) 26-35; John Kieran and Arthur Daley, *The Story of the Olympic Games 776 B.C. to 1964* (New York: J. B. Lippicott, 1965) 19-27.

⁹Pierre de Coubertin, *Souvenirs d’Amerique et de Grece* (Paris: Hachette et Cie, 1897) 105; translated in Henry, *An Approved History*, 28.

¹⁰Henry, *An Approved History*, 28.

¹¹Coubertin, *Olympism*, 580.

¹²Diem, *Ewiges Olympia*, 10-11.

This magic appeal sparkles not only with the big names of human history, politics, and sports; it seems to draw its life from an almost eternal flame, for the modern games had “survived the life and death of nations, spanned devastating depressions, and lived through two world wars.”¹³ After World War II, General McArthur affirmed this religious spirit in 1948 with the following words: “The [Olympic] athletic code has come down to us from even before the age of chivalry and knighthood. It embraces the highest moral laws and will stand the test of any ethics or philosophies ever promulgated for the uplift of man. Its requirements are for the things that are right, and its restraints are from the things that are wrong.”¹⁴ The Olympic Games quickly became an expression of the true essence of humankind, a sign of hope for unity, peace, justice, and happiness.

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The symbolic expression of this vision can easily be seen in the cultic celebrations of the games. Diem observed, “The opening of the Games: the sound of bells—fanfares—festive processions—choirs—speeches—vows—flags—doves—light symbols, all that means consecration, equal to a church festival, without copying it, and above all lies deep emotion, very similar to a religious ceremony.”¹⁵ All this makes the games, as Coubertin put it, “the great quadrennial festival of the human springtime.”¹⁶ This elevation of the world of sports to a level of the sacred should arouse the interest of ministers and theologians.¹⁷ If Coubertin is correct that “modern athletics is a *religion*, a *belief*, a *passionate movement of the spirit*,”¹⁸ can this spirit be reconciled with the Spirit of the Christian church?

AVAILABLE FASCINATION

One of the most fascinating characteristics of the Olympic Games is their consistency. As many have pointed out: war, depression, or pestilence could interrupt but never alter the unfailing four-year rhythm of the games.¹⁹ Coubertin explained:

The Olympic games must be held on a strictly astronomical rhythm, because they are the quadrennial celebration of the human springtime, honoring the

¹³Henry, *An Approved History*, 3.

¹⁴Ibid., 4-5.

¹⁵Diem, *Ewiges Olympia*, 11.

¹⁶Coubertin, *Olympism*, 44.

¹⁷A number of authors have recently focused on the quasi-religious character of popular sports. See, for example, the insightful article by Brian D. Ellison, “This Is My Bratwurst, Broken for Thee: The Dangerous Sacraments of Pro Football Fandom,” *Regeneration Quarterly* 7/3 (2001) 16-19.

¹⁸Coubertin, *Olympism*, 576.

¹⁹See, e.g., Henry, *An Approved History*, 14; Diem, *Ewiges Olympia*, 288.

successive arrival of human generations. That is why we must adhere to this rhythm strictly. Today as in antiquity, an Olympiad may fail to be held if unforeseen circumstances present an insurmountable obstacle, but neither the order nor the number of the Olympiad may be changed.²⁰

It is only in this strict measure of time and space that the fascination of the Olympic Games becomes tangible and *repeatable*.²¹ The primary aspect of this strict repetition is the renewal of its ancient origins in the present time, through which the fascination becomes controllable and reproducible. Heribert Mühlen informs us that “this return to the mythical origins, made possible through ‘holy’ periods of time, and the realization of those origins in a fixed ceremony is the *full form of the myth!* The fascination is guaranteed and, as it were, ‘available’ through the unchangeable quadrennial rhythm, which absolutely guarantees the recurrence of the past.”²²

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A repeatable fascination, however, is one of the greatest threats to Christian spirituality. The essence of a repeatable enthusiasm is its apparently infinite availability. In other words, humanity seems to possess the right and power of its disposition and its availability. This form of a recurring act of fascination must not be confused with the Christian *anamnesis* of the sacraments. The New Testament portrays the sacramental rituals of the church as an act of remembrance (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor 11:24-25). Yet, the fascination inherent in the Christian act of remembrance is more than a renewal of its ancient origins. “Memory, as in biblical usage, is more than a recalling to mind of the past. It is the work of the Holy Spirit linking the past with the present....Through the Spirit, therefore, the power of what is remembered is made present afresh, and succeeding generations appropriate the event commemorated.”²³ This means that the past is not only remembered, it is kept alive in the present and infused with new meaning for the future.²⁴ A genuine Christian fascination is thus not only an act of remembrance but also primarily an expression of a future hope (1 Cor 11:26).²⁵ “It in no way means a subjective, human psychological act of returning to the past.”²⁶ Christian enthusiasm is not a fascination with the

²⁰Coubertin, *Olympism*, 581.

²¹See Diem, *Der Olympische Gedanke: Reden und Aufsätze* (Stuttgart: Karl Hofmann, 1967) 23. Also Mühlen, *Entsakralisierung*, 35-40.

²²Mühlen, *Entsakralisierung*, 38.

²³“The Church as Communion in Christ: Second Report from the International Commission for Dialogue between the Disciples of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church,” *Mid-Stream* 33 (April 1994) 219-239.

²⁴Cf. Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995) 409-446.

²⁵Cf. John Macquarie, *A Guide to the Sacraments* (New York: Continuum, 1997) 115.

²⁶Louis Bouyer, *Eucharist: Theology and Spirituality of the Eucharistic Prayer* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 103.

old but with the *always new* covenant (Mark 14:24; Matt 26:28). “In the earthly liturgy we take part in a foretaste of that heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the holy city of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims...(see Rev 21:2; Col 3:1; Heb 8:2).”²⁷

Christian fascination is never controllable or disposable. The fascination of the church of the present is that it is both a church of the past (a past, however, that can never be repeated) and a church of the future (a future, however, that can never be fully caught up with). The kingdom of God is always coming;²⁸ it cannot be observed, repeated, or captured (Luke 17:20-21; John 18:36). It is among us not through strictly observed rituals but through the presence of Christ and his Holy Spirit (Matt 12:28).²⁹ The focus of Christian enthusiasm is therefore not concentrated on the things that were or the things that are, but on the fact that the things that were and the things that are point to the eschatological hope that is always immediately before us.

THE SPIRIT OF THE RECORD

A second characteristic of the Olympic games is the fact that the Olympic spirit is essentially the spirit of the record. Olympic fascination is nourished by an unbroken enthusiasm about ever new athletic records in faithful observance of Coubertin’s motto “Faster! Higher! Stronger!”³⁰ The games are more than a mere spectacle of athletic competition; they are an expression of the insatiable human desire to overcome one’s boundaries. From one Olympiad to the next, the audience expects new records. Thus, it is not the athlete who fought a good fight but the one who was victorious above the rest who stands on a platform separated from the crowds and competitors. It is a fascination with the “never-before,”³¹ an enthusiasm about breaking past limits of height, distance, and speed.

One may be tempted to answer with a fervent “No!” Coubertin’s pointed question, “Can a religion survive without there being, among its adherents, those given to excess and those driven by passion to carry the crowd by its example, and to dominate it?”³² But human limits are not inexhaustible. The fascination with ever new records reaches not only the personal limits of individual athletes, it exhausts the limits of human physical ability as such. In the first decades of the history of the modern games, records were easily broken. Nearly every victory during the first games also set an Olympic record, which was then easily replaced in the years that followed.³³ New training methods, better living conditions, and other

²⁷Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 8.

²⁸Cf. Heribert Mühlen, *Kirche wächst von innen* (Paderborn: Bonifatius, 1996) 115-118.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 117.

³⁰Cf. Mühlen, *Entsakralisierung*, 39.

³¹*Ibid.*, 40.

³²Coubertin, *Olympism*, 576.

³³*Ibid.*, 713-714.

factors rapidly increased athletic performance. At the end of the twentieth century, however, new records surpassed the old ones by only hundredths of a second or fractions of an inch. The fascination with the Olympic record will eventually exhaust itself.

The dictatorship of the record poses a severe threat to Christian spirituality. As Robert S. McGee has shown, an ongoing desire for performance and the frequent fear of failure as new records can no longer easily be set, can lead to depression, anger, anxiety, perfectionism, pride, or chemical dependency.³⁴ This form of enthusiasm must not be confused with a genuine desire for Christian perfection and spiritual growth. The Olympic thinking trusts in the natural abilities of humankind, which, as Luther remarked, necessarily leads to the false effort of the human person to deify itself.³⁵ The New Testament advice to seek perfection (e.g., Rom 12:2; 1 Cor 14:1; Col 1:9; 4:12) is a rejection of the Olympic perception that the record is “the quintessence of effort.”³⁶

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The effort of the Christian life is not based on the constant achievement of new records but grounded in God’s gift of justification (Rom 3:19-25; 2 Cor 5:21), propitiation (1 John 4:9-10), reconciliation (Col 1:19-22), and regeneration (2 Cor 5:17).³⁷ Unlike the Olympiad, human ambition and will are *not* the only driving force of the Christian life.³⁸ On the contrary, the spirit of the record leads to strife, jealousy, and divisions (1 Cor 4:8).³⁹ Christian excellence is not a perfection of the flesh (Gal 3:3) but perfection in God’s Spirit. To adopt the Olympic spirit would therefore introduce a concept of spiritual competition into the church that must at any cost be avoided. A genuine Christian enthusiasm is not a celebration of human effort but a service and doxology in one’s unconditional self-giving to God.

ANONYMOUS ENTHUSIASM

A third threat to Christian spirituality is found in the nature of the Olympic Games as primarily a spectator’s event.⁴⁰ In spite of Coubertin’s early rejection of too many stadiums and spectators, the games soon became an attraction for the masses.⁴¹ Coubertin observed that “quite often nearly half the spectators, a good

³⁴Robert S. McGee, *The Search for Significance* (Houston: Rapha, 1990) 48-52.

³⁵Cf. Simo Peura, “Die Vergöttlichung des Menschen als Sein in Gott,” *Lutherjahrbuch* 60 (1993) 39-71.

³⁶Coubertin, *Olympism*, 160.

³⁷Cf. McGee, *Search for Significance*, 231.

³⁸Coubertin, *Olympism*, 160.

³⁹Cf., e.g., Dieter Georgi, *Opponents of Paul in 2 Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1986).

⁴⁰Mühlen, *Entsakralisierung*, 40.

⁴¹Coubertin, *Olympism*, 184-185.

third of them in any case, do not understand much about the athletic event they are witnessing. Often it is these very spectators who show the greatest enthusiasm and cheer the loudest.⁴² What Coubertin had observed is an effect of the anonymity of the collective.⁴³ The individual is able to hide in the enthusiasm of the crowd and can thus for a few moments escape the pressures of everyday life. The extraordinary event provides an environment that excuses and absorbs excessive enthusiasm to a limited extent. The limits of this absorption, however, are recorded in the tragic reports of mass hysteria and riots that have come to characterize the landscape of many popular mass sports events around the world.

The success of any Olympiad is judged not only by the number of records broken but also by the number of those in attendance.⁴⁴ The large crowds, waving flags, rhythmic music, cheering choirs, and horns frequently excite the wild enthusiasm of the spectators: individuals, cities, and entire nations alike. The games become “a great...piece of machinery. Its gears do not screech and its movement never stops.”⁴⁵ There is indeed, as Coubertin had desired, “a sense of collective evolution,” as in the ancient games where “athletes, spectators, and functionaries offered sacrifice upon sacrifice to the symbolic deities whose images and altars were scattered about the sacred enclosure.”⁴⁶ No single individual emerges in this ritual of anonymity; all are carried by the folly and frivolous enthusiasm of the all-embracing Olympic spirit.

Anonymous enthusiasm is harmful to any genuine Christian worship. *Enthusiastic* worship, that is, “worship-in-God,” is primarily worship-in-Spirit as well as worship-in-truth (John 4:23); in other words, it is a willful coming into the presence of the Father through Christ and in the Spirit (Eph 2:18). The individual Christian has the responsibility consciously to join the worship and praise of the congregation.⁴⁷ However, corporate worship is not primarily sparked by the enthusiasm of the crowd; it is in the true sense of the word *self*-motivated.⁴⁸ It springs from a disciplined, intimate, and wholehearted fascination of the self with Jesus Christ and an enthusiasm that transforms the Christian self from a mere spectator, who witnesses and joins in a common act of worship, into a full member of Christ’s body, who is defined not only by acting as, but by truly *being*, a “worshiper.” Christian enthusiasm is never anonymous, never automatic, never excessive. It enhances the unity of the body and is an expression of the shared hope to participate in the glorious promises of God.

⁴²Ibid., 199.

⁴³Mühlen, *Entsakralisierung*, 40.

⁴⁴Coubertin noted in 1909 that this was a serious error; cf. *Olympism*, 267.

⁴⁵Ibid., 484.

⁴⁶Ibid., 596.

⁴⁷Bob Sorge, *Exploring Worship: A Practical Guide to Praise and Worship* (Canandaigua, NY: Oasis House, 1987) 35.

⁴⁸Ibid., 37.

This study has exposed some of the dangers of a thoughtless adoption of secular fascination and enthusiasm by Christian life and ministry. The religious character of secular enthusiasm worships the attributes of anonymity, the dictatorship of the record, and a disposable fascination. The analysis of these attributes shows that the growing desire for establishing greater relevancy and acceptance of the ministry and worship of the Christian church in the world for the sake of greater enthusiasm has its limits. The church *cannot* find itself in the “sacred” structures of the world.⁴⁹

The spirit of the Olympic games stands representative for a fascination of the world, which must not be emulated by the churches. It is certainly able to kindle the enthusiasm of the churches for a time; however, its principles eventually will undermine the biblical and spiritual basis of a genuine Christian fascination. Christian enthusiasm is the gift of God and not the product of human emotions and aspirations for control and success. Cheering crowds, flags, choirs, horns, and other expressions of enthusiasm are biblical and should be a welcome addition to any Christian worship. Any expression of these external forms of secular enthusiasm in the churches must, however, be characterized by a rejection of the detrimental principles of secular fascination and be grounded on an emphasis of the unique and irreproducible origins of the church in Jesus Christ, the always new nature of the covenant, and the eschatological hope of the always approaching kingdom of God. The basis for Christian enthusiasm is a conscious fascination of each individual believer with the free and unmerited gifts of God manifested in a life in the Spirit. It remains the continuing challenge of the church in the third millennium to become a more fascinating vessel as the expression of the consuming fire of God (Heb 12:29) in the world. Such Spirit-filled life seeks expression without excess. It finds fulfillment not in achievements and records but in a manifestation of the fruit of the Spirit, which contains all things necessary for true Christian enthusiasm: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, and self-control (Gal 5:22-23). Against such, there is no law. ⊕

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⁴⁹Contra Mühlen, *Entsakralisierung*, 221. See, however, “Die unzerstörbare Faszination,” *Orientierung* 36/4 (1972) 47-51.