

Original Paper

Strength of Religious Faith: A Comparison of College Athletes

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Abstract

Faith is the foundation of all religions. Sporting practices may be an important site for both private and public expressions or exercises of religious faith. Beyond knowing or construing a deeper meaning to life, the exercise of religious faith may likewise serve as a coping mechanism within the sports context. Specifically, religious practice may help athletes manage the uncertainty of outcome in sport, as well as their fear of sustaining a serious injury. Given the potential psychological benefit of religious faith within this context, researchers have hypothesized that college athletes would demonstrate higher levels of religious faith than other post-secondary students. The current study seeks to expand on this research, examining hypothesized differences among college athletes at a large, public Division I university on the west coast of the United States. Participants completed the Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith (SCSRF)—Short Form (Plante, Vallaeys, Sherman, & Wallston, 2002), a five-item self-report measure utilized to assess strength of religious faith regardless of religious affiliation. Findings suggests that both level of athletic competition and racial identification contribute to higher levels of religious faith. That racial identity was a stronger predictor than level of athletic competition is worthy of further exploration from both a social and historical perspective.

Keywords

College athletes, religious faith, competitive athletic level, racial identity

1. Introduction: The Meaningful Intersection of Sport and Religion

As social institutions, religion and sport function in similar ways. They socialize novices into the group, reinforce behaviors and reaffirm cultural values (Burstyn, 2001; Coakley, 2009; Overman, 2011). Through ritualized performances, codes of community conduct form, establishing a sense of order and meaning. This order helps define boundaries, rules and a shared set of behaviors and rituals. Faithful followers learn and adhere to these behaviors and rituals, believing in a larger purpose or authority. Sports help build community consciousness, from local to national identities. Sport spectatorship often

involves intense identification with teams, players or values perceived to be the basis for success in sports (Clarke & Clarke, 1982; Coakley, 1996; Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001). As the stakes get higher within the realm of sports—where a win-at-all-costs ethos permeates the social practice—religious faith through prayer or other activities may be a contributing factor for some in optimizing the potential for success, a kind of mental anchor (Knight-Ridder, 1997; Lee, Liu, & Monfre, 2015; Maranise, 2013; Winston, 2016).

Elite athletes possess an ascetic attention to practice similar to the most devoted disciples of a religious order. A commitment to self-improvement and the internal sacrifice required of such commitment may result in remarkable displays of physical and aesthetic action in sport. At the highest level, athletic feats may seem otherworldly, bordering on the miraculous. These spectacular feats and mediated displays of awe inspire miracles and legends, whether real or imaginary. The United States Men's Hockey defeat of the Soviet Union at the 1980 Lake Placid Winter Olympic Games is forever inscribed as the Miracle on Ice, while superstar athletes such as Michael Jordan or LeBron James are described as gods or messiahs (McDonald & Andrews, 2002; Mocarski & Billings, 2014).

Popular texts such as Phil Jackson's *Sacred Hoops* (2012), Millman's *Way of the Peaceful Warrior* (2000) and Pressfield's *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (2009) utilize sport as a vehicle for spiritual transcendence, sacrificing the self and seeking union with the divine. In this sense, sport becomes an expression of spirituality, the athlete's body a divine vessel or temple. As evidenced in religious texts, such as the *New Testament* (New International Version, 2003), the endurance and sacrifice exercised in sport provides as an apt metaphor for religious piety and commitment (Note 1). In 1 Corinthians 9: 24-27 NIV (2003), for example, Paul the Apostle writes

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only
one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.
Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training.
They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get
a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like
someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating
the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so
that after I have preached to others, myself will not be disqualified
for the prize.

In this way, both religious piety and sport inspire participants to test their physical limits and human potential, whereby the practice provides a platform for spiritual training towards a kind of transcendence. That is, the purpose of the race is the training and the sacrifice inherent to an eternal commitment rather than material reward, or the prize.

And yet, the growth and development of modern sport in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has led scholars to argue that sports have begun to supplement or even supplant organized religion as a quasi-religious social practice (Burstyn, 2001; Coakley, 1996; Edwards, 1973; Novak, 1993;

Price, 2001). While Karl Marx described religion as the opiate of the masses, numerous scholars have described the narcotic and numbing effects of sport in modern society. As a modern opiate, according to these scholars, sport serves to pacify the public and masks existing social problems, subverting collective efforts to address these social issues (Coakley, 1996; p. 90; Hoch, 1972; Petryszak, 1978). As Burstyn (2001) argues, sport approximates the experience of religion more than any other form of human cultural practice. In the United States, where dominant sporting practices celebrate power, performance and hegemonic masculinity (Coakley, 2009; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Coutts & Van Rheenen, 2021; Messner, 1990, 2011; Lenskij, 2013), “sport is a religion of domination and aggression centered around a male godhead” (Burstyn, 2001, p. 23).

Whether one ascribes to this argument or not, both sport and religion effectively function to promote a particular belief system or ideology. In particular, dominant sports (e.g., mainstream, spectator, national pastimes) often support and reproduce the reigning ideology at a given moment in time (Carrington & MacDonald, 2009; Van Rheenen, 2013, 2019). In the United States, the values most cherished and celebrated include hard work, individual achievement, conformity and competitive success (Coakley, 2009; Eitzen & Sage, 2009; Sage, 1998). The sport ethic—the slogans and symbolic promotion of these dominant values—reflects a broader work ethic central to the American Dream, whereby all citizens have an equal opportunity to achieve wealth and success. In this regard, sports support the belief that American society is a meritocracy, promoting the idea that success is achieved by those who deserve it (Coakley, 2009; Overman, 2011; Van Rheenen, 2019).

Conversely, those who do not succeed or are unable to experience the spoils of the dream (e.g., winning, as reflected in the acquisition of social and economic capital) deserve their fate. That the national narrative is spurious does not make its cultural purchase any less pervasive, particularly as a persistent ideology or logic presented as common sense. And yet, sport as a vehicle for upward social mobility—“Horatio Alger in high tops” (Van Rheenen, 2013, p. 563)—has become an intoxicating national storyline, despite little to no evidence in support of such beliefs (Eitzen, 2016, Mahiri & Van Rheenen, 2010; Mantsios, 2003). Religion, on the other hand, is a vehicle for upward spiritual mobility or transcendence, further reinforcing how sport and religion share similar social functions in transgressing material and spiritual boundaries.

1.1 Defining Faith at the Intersection of Sport and Religion

And yet, while sport and religion may function similarly as social institutions, such theoretical abstractions obscure the lived experiences of those engaged in these athletic and religious activities, particularly where these social and personal activities and practices intersect. For example, recent scholarship has investigated the role of religion in the lives of athletes, primarily among intercollegiate athletes (Bell, Johnson, & Peterson, 2009; Buhrmann & Zaugg, 1983; Gabana et al., 2019; Moore, Berkley-Patton, & Hawes, 2013; Storch, Roberti, Bravata, & Storch, 2004).

Faith is the foundation of all religions. According to Cipriani (2007), religions are “integrated and shared beliefs and rituals that people accept as faith and use as a source of meaning, guidance and

transcendence” (p. 3853). More specifically, as Fowler (1992) has argued,

Faith is that *knowing or construing* by which persons or communities recognize themselves as related to the ultimate conditions of their existence. In this sense, faith is a knowing or construing which fixes on the relatedness of a person or a community to power(s), boundaries (such as death and finitude), and source(s) of being, value and meaning which impinge on life in a manner not subject to personal control. In theological language, faith is the knowing or construing by which persons apprehend themselves as related to the Transcendent (pp. 4-5, author’s original italics).

Similarly, Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1978) conceives of faith as “a personal piety or pervasive disposition that permeates and gives coherence to all of a person’s strivings and responses” (p. 42). In this sense, as Smith argues, “one’s ‘religion’ may be piety and faith, obedience, worship and a vision of God” (p. 43, Note 2).

In *We Have been Believers: An African American Systematic Theology*, Evans (2012) argues that “God’s revelation is multidimensional because it is essentially a personal encounter. That revelation concerns whole persons and whole communities in their particularity” (p. 18). For particular social groups, such as the poor or people of color, according to Evans, “God’s revelation involves more than solving abstract epistemological problems” (p. 16). Revelation provides a quintessential vehicle for human liberation. Evans continues,

What this means, theologically speaking, is that to attempt to formulate an understanding God’s revelation apart from an analysis of the unjust structures of social existence does violence to both the significance of that revelation and to the integrity of the liberation struggles carried on by the victims of society. Such a separation would make God’s revelation a quaint addition to our knowledge of an ancient religion with no salvific significance for the world in which we live. It would also distort the transcendent dimension of the universal human longing for freedom and justice (p. 15).

According to Evans, then, the fervent longing for salvation and an infinite plan within this finite world resonates in particular with those oppressed, as these victims of society seek a better future than the here—and—now. With no intention of devaluing the depth of such religious faith, sport may also serve as a platform for meaning-making and transcendence beyond the confines of the game or contest. That is, sporting practices may be an important site for religious expression or exercises of faith, a freedom or liberation experienced outside the normal confines of daily life.

Despite faith's non-denominational essence, Christianity reigns supreme on the gridiron and playing fields as the dominant religion witnessed within American spectator sports (Krattenmaker, 2010; Ladd & Mathisen, 1999; Price, 2001). In fact, according to Coakley (2009) "little is known about the relationships between sports and major world religions other than particular forms of Christianity" (p. 546). This is in part due to our nation's past and its Puritanical roots, whereby the Protestant ethic, with its Calvinist tradition, exalted hard work and temperance over temptation as a religious calling: the harder one worked in this life, the better (and sooner) one's salvation in the next (Baker, 2009; Overman, 2011; Weber, 2002). In his gendered analysis of the development of modern sport and the emergence of a "muscular Christianity" during the 19th century (Gems, 2005; MacAloon, 2006; Putney, 2009), Crosset (1990) has argued, "just as accumulation of wealth served as a sign of salvation or a moral lifestyle during an earlier period, athletic prowess served to symbolize morality, rationality and superiority in young men and was a measurable sign of clean living and future success" (p. 53).

The relationship of religion and sport is further nuanced by racial identification, as Evans notes above. The Black church serves as a cornerstone for Black social life and culture in the United States (McKinney, 2011). In particular, the Black church holds a strong historical significance to Black social movements, civil rights and liberation (Billingsley, 1999; Evans, 2012; Gaines II, 2010; Pattillo-McCoy, 1998), connected as well to the afterlife of slavery (Dewulf, 2021; Ekechi, 2009; Sensbach, 2005). Similarly, the institution of sport has served the Black community as a platform for political activism and social movements.

1.2 A Coping Mechanism

Beyond knowing or construing a deeper meaning to life, the exercise of religious faith may likewise serve as a coping mechanism within the sports context. Specifically, religious practice may help athletes manage the uncertainty of outcome in sport, as well as their fear of losing an important game or sustaining a serious injury (Czech & Bullett, 2007; Gould, Bridges, Udry, & Beck, 1997; Storch & Farber, 2002). As such, practicing religious faith, such as prayer, may function as a cognitive strategy for reducing competition-related anxiety and the corresponding maladaptive behaviors utilized to combat this distress (Hoffman, 1992; Storch, Roberti, Bravata, & Storch, 2004; Storch, Storch, Kovac, Okun, & Welsh, 2003). Among college athletes, for example, religious faith has been shown to be inversely associated with alcohol and drug use and abuse (Storch, Storch, Kovacs, Okun and Welsh, 2003; Moore, Berkley-Patton and Hawes, 2013;), including as a protection against such unethical behaviors as doping to seek competitive advantage in sport (Rodeck, Sekulic, & Pasalic, 2009; Zenic, Stipic, & Sekalic, 2013; Zwan et al., 2017).

Given the uncertainty associated with athletic competition and the potential psychological benefit of religious faith within the sports context, researchers have hypothesized that college athletes would demonstrate higher levels of religious faith than other students (Storch, Kolsky, Silvestri, & Storch, 2001; Storch, Roberti, Bravata, & Storch, 2004). In their study of college students at the University of Florida, for example, Storch et al. (2004) confirmed that college athletes reported higher levels of

religious faith than non-athletes. Participants in this study were primarily female (74%), Caucasian (75%) and included a relatively small sample (25%) of athletes among those surveyed. The study did not differentiate the athletes by team affiliation or competitive level. Additionally, Czech and Bullett (2007) have found that the frequency of prayer among college athletes increased with the importance of the performance (e.g., a championship game), suggesting that both the level and perceived meaning of a particular competition may be factors in predicting strength of religious faith.

Conversely, Bell, Johnson and Peterson (2009) found that non-athletes were significantly more religious than athletes at one Division III religiously practicing institution (RPI). At a NCAA Division III non-religiously practicing institution (NRPI), however, these authors found no statistical difference between athletes and non-athletes. Few studies have sought to compare the strength of religious faith within the college athlete population as a highly diverse student group at educational institutions.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The current study seeks to expand on this research, examining hypothesized differences among college athletes at a large, public Division I university on the west coast of the United States. Specifically, we hypothesized that varsity athletes would report a higher level of religious faith than club sport athletes based upon the perceived importance and potential anxiety associated with higher levels of competition. This anxiety may be exacerbated by the physical risks associated with this competition. Additionally, we hypothesized that athletes participating in the marquee sports of football and men's and women's basketball would report higher levels of religious faith than Olympic or non-marquee sport athletes, based on enhanced media exposure, increased commercialization and a pressure to "go pro" (e.g., playing professionally) as a vehicle for upward social and economic mobility. Because football and basketball have professional leagues into which many of these male and female Division I college athletes aspire, the perceived negative consequences of poor athletic performance or sustaining a career-ending injury may also be higher. Thus, the stakes associated with athletic participation may be higher for this group of college athletes.

The economic costs associated with short and long term injury may lead these marquee athletes to develop coping mechanisms, such as heightened religious faith. Finally, and without demeaning the sincerity of athletes' genuine religious faith, there is the possibility that a public expression of religious faith enhances an athlete's image or brand for potential professional franchises and/or marketing opportunities from sponsors. This public expression may lead agents, scouts and front office staff to view these athletes as possessing positive social characteristics, such as a greater likelihood of conforming to team norms and rules and a willingness to respect authority figures, such as coaches and management. Just as Crosset (1990) argued relative to the development of a muscular Christianity, elite athletes who actively practice religious faith may connote a heightened morality and other desired character traits within the sporting arena.

In order to further analyze these two hypotheses, we tested differences in reported strength of religious faith by demographic variables, such as gender, racial identity and socio-economic status. These additional analyses sought to determine whether hypothesized differences were confounded by these discrete variables. A prior study at the same institution (Ashton, Van Rheenen, & Pryor, 2020) has shown a significant positive relationship between Division I college football players' degree of religious faith and their level of homophobia, regardless of racial identification. This study serves to further explore the strength of religious faith in the lived experience of Division I college athletes.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

Four hundred and sixty-two (N=462) college athletes from a large Division I public university on the west coast of the United States participated in the study. This sample population was comprised of two hundred and seventy-two varsity college athletes (N=272) and one hundred and sixty-four club sport athletes (N=164). Furthermore, thirty (N=30) marquee athletes participating on the football and men's and women's basketball varsity teams were included in this sample.

The university competes in the Pacific-12 athletic conference and consistently ranks within the top intercollegiate athletic programs in the United States, based upon the NACDA Learfield Sports Directors' Cup national rankings (NACDA, 2020). The university offers a broad-based intercollegiate athletic program, comprised of 30 varsity sports and over 800 active college athletes. The university also offers 34 club sports programs that compete at the regional and national level. Club sports programs are student-run organizations which rely on student dues. These programs are housed within the Department of Recreational Sports.

The university's athletic department administers all varsity sports programs, with an annual budget of approximately 100 million dollars. Sixty percent of varsity athletes are on a partial to full athletics scholarship, while 40% are non-scholarship. None of the club sport athletes is on athletics aid. The entire budget of the club sport programs is \$800, 000, less than one one-hundredth the annual budget of the university's athletic department.

While both groups of college athletes participate in sports at the university as an extracurricular activity, the time demands expected of varsity athletes on average exceeds that experienced of club sport athletes (NCAA, 2019). Varsity athletes are also heavily recruited to the university to participate athletically, receiving certain advantages or privileges as a result of agreeing to attend and compete at this particular institution (Hextrum, 2021; Van Rheenen, 2019). While the NCAA prohibits treating college athletes differently than the general student body (NCAA, 2021), this student group receives admissions preferences, separate and exclusive academic and career support, as well as medical and nutritional care. Relative to varsity athletes, then, club sport athletes resemble the general student body, as they receive few, if any, of these advantages.

2.2 Procedures

Through the principal investigator's institutional position, all active club and varsity athletes at the institution were invited to participate in this study via email. The email included a link to an online survey hosted by a third-party website. To encourage participation, the survey was brief and able to be completed within 10-15 minutes. Participation was voluntary and confidential. Participants were not compensated. Data was exported from the online survey platform and analyzed using STATA statistical software.

2.3 Instruments

Participants completed the Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith (SCSRF)—Short Form (Plante, Vallaeys, Sherman, & Wallston, 2002), a five-item self-report measure utilized to assess strength of religious faith regardless of religious denomination or affiliation. Sample questions include "I pray daily," and "my faith impacts many of my decisions." The scale uses a four-point Likert-type response format, ranging from (1) Strongly Disagree to (4) Strongly Agree. Higher aggregate scores indicate greater strength of religious faith. The short five-item form is derived from the original ten-item SCSRFFQ scale (Plante & Boccaccini, 1997a). The two scales correlate highly ($r=.95$) and have sound psychometric properties, including excellent internal consistency, a stable factor structure and convergent validity with other measures of religiosity (Lewis, Shevlin, McGuckin, & Naurati, 2001; Plante & Boccaccini, 1997a and 1997b; Storch, Roberti, Bravata, & Storch, 2004). The internal consistency of this scale within our analyses was also high ($r=.92$).

Multiple regression analyses were conducted using the religious faith scale as the dependent variable and the following independent variables (variable name in bold):

1. **Varsity** - A dummy variable indicating if a student is a varsity athlete, with club sport athletes as the reference category;
2. **Marquee** - A dummy variable indicating if a student is a men's or women's varsity basketball player or varsity college football player, with student athletes from all other sports as the reference category;
3. **Female** - A dummy variable indicating if a student is female, with male participants as the reference category);
4. **Family socioeconomic status** - A dummy variable was created for each of the following categories: working class, lower-middle class, middle class, upper-middle class, and upper class (the reference category);
5. **Racial/Ethnic identification**: A dummy variable was created for each of the following categories: White, American Indian, Asian American, Hispanic/Latino, Biracial, not American, other, and African American (the reference category).

Additionally, coefficients were standardized in order to compare the data across these independent variables.

3. Results

Mean responses on the religious faith scale between club athletes, varsity Olympic (e.g., non-marquee), and varsity marquee college athletes primarily support our hypotheses that (i) varsity athletes would report higher strength of religious faith than club sport athletes; and (ii) athletes participating in the marquee sports of football and basketball would report higher levels of religious faith than both club sport athletes and varsity Olympic or non-marquee college athletes. Table 1 shows the mean response for each category of college athlete.

Table 1. Mean Scores of the Strength of Religious Faith for College Athletes

Category	N	Mean Religious Faith Scale Score
Club Sport	164	1.92
Varsity Olympic (Non-Marquee)	272	2.24
Varsity Marquee	30	2.83

T-tests conducted between the three groups of American college athletes further supported the hypotheses. Results were as follows:

The difference between Club Sport and Varsity athletes was significant ($p < 0.001$, $t = -4.62$).

Specifically,

- The difference between Club Sport and Varsity Olympic (non-Marquee) athletes was significant ($p < 0.03$, $t = -2.22$); and,
- The difference between Club Sport and Varsity Marquee athletes was significant ($p < 0.001$, $t = -4.44$).

Even though the marquee college athletes (football and men's and women's basketball players) were the most religious group of all college athletes at this particular university,

- The difference between Olympic and Marquee Varsity college athletes was not significant ($p = .61$).

While the mean scores themselves provide insight into our hypotheses, additional statistical analyses were conducted to explore differences between these three groups with greater nuance. Specifically, multiple regression analyses incorporating a set of student background variables explored additional demographic factors influencing the relative strength of religious faith. Table Two presents these findings.

Table 2. Multiple Regression Analyses of the Strength of Religious Faith for All College Athletes (Club & Varsity)

Variable Name	Est. Coeff. (Std. Err.)	95% Confidence Interval		P-Value
		Lower	Upper	
Varsity	0.36 (0.09)	0.18	0.53	**<.001
Marquee	0.50 (0.17)	.15	.84	*<.01
Female	-0.08 (0.08)	-0.24	0.07	.30
SES				
Working Class	0.19 (0.23)	-0.27	0.65	.42
Lower-Middle Class	0.20 (0.21)	-0.22	0.61	.35
Middle Class	0.10 (0.17)	-0.23	0.44	.54
Upper-Middle Class	0.10 (0.17)	-0.22	0.43	.53
Race/Nationality				
Black	0.55 (0.16)	0.24	0.86	*<.01
Asian	0.27 (0.13)	0.02	0.51	*<0.05
Pacific Islander	0.44 (0.25)	-0.06	0.93	0.09
American Indian	0.30 (0.48)	-0.65	1.25	0.63
Hispanic	0.17 (0.21)	-0.25	0.59	0.81
Multiracial	0.10 (0.21)	-0.30	0.51	0.61
International	-0.13 (0.30)	-0.72	0.45	0.65
_cons	1.81 (0.21)	1.40	2.23	<0.001

** $p \leq .01$

* $p \leq .05$

As depicted in Table 2, both multiple regression analyses found several significant results. In response to our first hypothesis, varsity players were on average 0.36 points higher on the faith scale than club athletes. This difference was significant at the 0.05 alpha (Chronbach, 1951) level ($p < 0.001$, $t=4.15$). In testing the second hypothesis, our analyses found that the marquee sport of men's and women's basketball and football players were on average 0.50 points higher on the faith scale than all other college athletes. This difference was significant at the 0.05 alpha (Chronbach, 1951) level ($p = 0.002$, $t=3.13$).

3.1 Varsity College Athletes

An additional multiple regression analysis was conducted that restricted the dataset to just varsity college athletes. This model specifically examined reported differences between marquee and Olympic or non-marquee varsity college athletes. While there was no significant finding between varsity marquee and varsity Olympic college athletes as a result of their sport affiliation, we likewise analyzed the relative influence, if any, on differences in religious faith among college athletes by social or demographic categories.

3.2 Background Variables: Faith as a Personal and Community Disposition

As illustrated in Table 3, we found no differences by gender or family socio-economic status. Race, however, factored significantly into our analysis. When comparing across all independent variables, we observed that the biggest difference on the self-reported religious faith index occurred between Black and White student athletes. Black student athletes were on average 0.65 points higher on the faith scale than White student athletes. This difference was significant at the 0.05 alpha level ($p < 0.001$, $t=-3.77$).

Table 3. Multiple Regression Analyses of the Strength of Religious Faith for Varsity College Athletes

Variable Name	Est. Coeff. (Std. Err.)	95% Confidence Interval		P-Value
		Lower	Upper	
Marquee	-0.17 (0.21)	0.59	0.24	.41
Female	0.01 (0.10)	-0.19	0.21	.93
SES				
Working Class	0.36 (0.32)	-0.27	0.99	.26
Lower-Middle Class	0.20 (0.28)	-0.34	0.75	.46
Middle Class	0.13 (0.23)	-0.31	0.58	.55

Upper-Middle Class	0.10 (0.22)	-0.33	0.53	.65
Race/Nationality				
Black	0.65 (0.17)	0.31	0.99	**<.001
Asian	0.31 (0.27)	-0.22	0.83	0.25
Pacific Islander	0.53 (0.31)	-0.08	1.14	0.09
American Indian	0.18 (0.50)	-0.81	1.16	0.73
Hispanic	0.23 (0.28)	-0.32	0.77	0.42
Multiracial	0.27 (0.27)	-0.26	0.79	0.32
International	-0.50 (0.43)	-1.34	0.35	0.25
_cons	2.07 (0.26)	1.56	2.57	<0.001

** $p \leq .01$

* $p \leq .05$

This finding suggests that a college athlete's racial identity was the strongest predictor for determining the largest religious faith differences among these groups. The marquee sports of football and men's and women's basketball players produced the second largest faith discrepancy when compared to all other college athletes. These two findings are confounded, however, as the American dominant sports of football and men's and women's basketball are over-represented with student athletes who identify as Black. Finally, varsity college athletes produced the third largest difference in reported levels of religious faith when compared to club sport athletes on this college campus.

Findings from the analysis of all college athletes, including both those participating in varsity and club sports, showed that Asian-identifying students were on average 0.27 points higher on the faith scale than White college athletes (see Table 2). This significance was not replicated in the analysis when only varsity athletes were included, however (see Table 3). This difference is likely explained by the greater number of Asian-identifying club sport athletes. Specifically, four out of five (80%) Asian college athletes were club sport athletes. Additionally, approximately half of the Asian respondents identified as belonging to a religious group, with the Christian religion being the most popular affiliation reported (19%). In examining religious affiliation among varsity college athletes, Christian was also selected

most often (31%). Finally, of all three groups of college athletes at this institution, marquee varsity athletes, those participating in football and basketball, reported the highest percentage of those who identified as being Christian (45%).

4. Discussion

This study contributes to existing literature, empirically demonstrating differences in reported levels of religious faith based on an American college athlete's racial identity and respective level of athletic competition. Division I is the highest level of athletic competition within the country and this institution is also a part of the Power Five autonomy conferences (the Atlantic Coast, Big Ten, Big 12, Pac-12 and Southeastern), which comprise the 65 most athletically competitive universities within all of American college sports (NCAA, 2021). Division I varsity college athletes were significantly more religious than club sport athletes at this large, public university on the west coast of the United States.

As club sport athletes are seldom recruited to the university for their athletic ability and potential, this group of college athletes are therefore more representative of the general student body at this institution. They do not receive preferential admissions, nor do they receive athletic grants-in-aid (e.g., athletic scholarships). Club sport athletes, on average, devote fewer hours towards their sport activities than do varsity college athletes; club sport athletes seldom see their sport as a potential vehicle for upward social and economic mobility. Thus, the stakes for athletic success, and the corresponding risks associated with pursuing such goals, sometimes referred to as *hoop dreams* (Banet-Weiser, 1999; James & Marx, 1994), are significantly higher for varsity, and especially marquee, college athletes.

Among varsity college athletes in the United States, football and men's and women's basketball college athletes may be some of the most athletically identified on their respective campuses. They are often heavily recruited and most members of the team are on full athletic scholarships. By comparison, well over half of varsity college athletes at this institution either receive no athletic scholarship or only a partial athletics grant-in-aid. Additionally, football and basketball receive the most media and spectator attention at this and other Division I institutions and these three marquee sports are likewise viewed as farm systems for the three most popular male and female professional leagues in the country, the National Football League (NFL) the National Basketball Association (NBA) and the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA). Despite the significant notoriety of these marquee college sports in American popular culture, the odds of "going pro" for these college athletes remains very low.

4.1 Racial Identity and Religious Faith

It appears that racial identity is confounded with varsity sport status, particularly as it relates to these marquee sports. These sports, both at the Division 1A collegiate and professional levels, are over-represented with Black or African American players. According to the *Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport* (TIDES, 2021a), nearly half (49%) of all college football players at the Division I FBS level during the 2019-2020 season were Black, while 70% of all NFL (professional) players during the same year were black (TIDES, 2021b). For men's basketball, both at the collegiate and professional

ranks, these numbers are even more striking, with 53% of college basketball players (TIDES, 2021a) and 74% of professional players identifying as Black or African American, with a full 83% of NBA players identifying as a person of color (TIDES, 2021c). For women's basketball, 42% of Division I college players identified as Black or African American (TIDES, 2021a), while 69% of WNBA players were Black or African American during the 2020 season, while 80% of these players identifying as people of color (TIDES, 2021d).

The results of this study suggests that *both* racial identification and varsity athletic status contribute to higher levels of religious faith. As the stakes grow higher and the athletic competition and perceived level of importance for a game or match increases, there is an increased likelihood that participants will self-report higher levels of religious faith. That racial identity was a stronger predictor than level of athletic competition is worthy of further exploration. Given this paper's quantitative approach, we are unable to posit the underlying motivation for strength of religious faith among marquee sport college athletes, as well as the nuanced and historical relationship between faith and race. These findings may also be particular to this group of college athletes participating at this Division I university, a potential limitation to this study. We encourage researchers to replicate our analyses at other colleges and universities competing at varying levels and divisions, both private and public.

We envision our future work to explore a diasporic and disaggregated analysis of college athletes within racialized groups, especially for Black and Asian-identified respondents. Extending the present study with a diasporic analysis will enable us to map the historical connections between religious faith, racialized groups, and the corresponding cultural promotion of an athletic identification. This will help to further analyze the meaningful role of Christianity, and the Black Church specifically, in supporting the cultural significance of sport in the African American community. These analyses may extend to social groups within the Asian-American diaspora as well, specifically Pacific Islander communities. Ultimately, this forthcoming analysis will explore the triangulation between colonial histories, Christianity, and particular sporting practices and communities. We believe that the institution of sport in higher education reproduces these relationships and thereby promote a legacy of coloniality.

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Notes

Note 1. See, for example, 1 Corinthians 4: 9-10 New International Version (NIV); 1 Corinthians 9: 24-27 NIV; Galatians 2: 1-2 NIV; Galatians 5:6-8 NIV; 2 Timothy 2: 3-7 NIV; Hebrews 12:1 NIV.

Note 2. It is for this reason that Smith distinguishes between “religion” from “faith,” the abstract from the actual. “For if faith is personal”, he writes, “then even in principle it is not a generic entity, but a living quality. It is not a fixed something, but the throbbing actuality of a myriad of someones. There is no such thing, I have argued, as religion or a religion; and when one divides what has been called that into two parts, an overt tangible tradition on the one hand and a vital personal faith on the other, neither of the resultant parts is a thing either, definite, stable, static, complete, definable, metaphysically given. To see faith truly is to see it actually, not ideally” (p. 189).