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Prophets on the Field – review

Shoemaker, Terry (Ed.). (2019). *The Prophetic Dimension of Sport*.

Cham: Springer

<https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007%2F978-3-030-02293-8#toc>

Sport is not only an aggregate of players, rules, equipment etc. but a social phenomenon in which interactions, messages, actions take place. The Springer series – *Briefs in Religious Studies* – focuses on one particular aspect of this: how sport became a civil religious phenomenon in the United States and how some actors can be understood as prophets. The short book offers a comprehensive introduction and five more chapters, including case studies on the topic.

The introduction points out that sport is an escape from political issues but at the same time its actors (athletes, coaches, fans etc.) provide criticism – moreover, today these actors have more platforms available to them.

The book's next chapter outlines the notion of the prophetic dimension of sport: while sport reflects our dominant values in a culture, at the same time it is capable of challenging some of these – as religions do. Sport can be understood as an institution which gives opportunities for “prophetic work” and itself can behave as a “prophetic institution”. According to Marxist views sport as religion reflects the economic base and supports its norms and values such as competition, but at the same time it can challenge these, for instance by loyalty and teamwork – two qualities also associated with sport.

The sociologist Harry Edwards is mentioned as a kind of prophet of sport as he believed in the humanitarian and equalitarian counter-creeds of sport and its capability of not only being a mirror of society but a tool for changing it. Dave Zirin sportswriter and sports editor perceived athletes as political beings and carriers of a dream, and believed that sport can achieve a more cooperative and accessible state without a competitive spirit.

In the following chapters we find some of interesting case studies. One of these summons Jackie Robinson, the African-American basketball player's story: he was signed by Branch Rickey sports executive, breaking the color barrier of Major League Baseball. This “great experiment” was later based on a myth created by Rickey, who thought of himself as a kind of prophet: he wrote in a letter how God wanted him to act, and he chose Robinson because of his religious background.

Colin Kaepernick's recent actions are better known for the public: a chapter summarizes and analyzes these events. Kaepernick was an American football quarterback who kneeled during the national anthem to draw attention to racial injustices in the United States. His actions are analyzed through the philosopher Cornel West's concept of “black prophetic fire”, the

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ability to deliver a social critique in the name of the oppressed people within an idealistic national past and also a promising future. Kaepernick's actions are grasped as a counter-force against neoliberalism (which is not part of "the best of the past"), the current structure that mistreats marginalized groups.

The book also gives insight of how American basketball athletes are related to the Black Lives Matter movement, setting up sport as a principal field for prophetic activities.

In the final chapter civil religion's presence in sports is understood in two ways: the first is based on testimonies of faith, celebrating passion towards sports as a religious phenomenon, the second is the prophetic kind by which athletes have the opportunity to challenge the status quo.

The short publication offers great instruments for the understanding of the religious and prophetic dimensions of sport not only by earlier and new theoretic approaches but by case studies which are very useful. While it may seem that the book focuses on a marginal topic, in fact it tackles an important social phenomenon. It concentrates only on the U.S. but this gives opportunity for scholars to follow the path and analyze similar issues in their own societies.