

Article

Babe Ruth: Religious Icon

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Abstract: Babe Ruth is a mythic figure in American baseball history. His extraordinary skills and legendary exploits are central to the idea of baseball as America’s national pastime and are woven into the fabric of American history and iconography. Much has been written about Ruth’s life, his extraordinary physical powers, and the legends that grew up around him that made him a mythic figure. The story of Babe Ruth as it has been told, however, has not included its meaning from the perspective of the study of religion and sport. This paper explores the life and legends of Babe Ruth to illustrate the significance of Ruth’s identity as a Catholic in early twentieth-century America and the fundamental connections between Ruth’s story and the Christian myth and ritual that is foundational to American civil religion.

Keywords: Baseball; Babe Ruth; American Catholicism

1. Introduction

Baseball, America’s “national pastime,” was central to early twentieth-century American mythology. Even if it has been surpassed by football and basketball in the American consciousness and imagination in the contemporary era, baseball serves as a reminder of the virtues and values of the American past. Babe Ruth (1895–1948) was the dominant figure in that narrative. His unparalleled ability to hit home runs farther and with more frequency than anyone before him transformed the game from an institution marred by accusations of gambling and characterized by tough, aggressive play into a demonstration of awe-inspiring power and beauty. Ruth’s athleticism combined with his larger-than-life personality changed baseball from an expression of the puritan work ethic located in a pastoral setting to a celebration of the new urban media and consumer culture that would resonate in American life in the 1920s and beyond.

Ruth’s status as a mythic hero has been well documented. He has been the subject of numerous works of fiction, documentaries, exhibitions, conferences, biographies, and scholarly articles that demonstrate his importance to baseball history and to American society more broadly (Montville 2006; Leavy 2018; Wehrle 2018; Smelser 1993; Creamer 2005; Keane 2008). Recent scholarship has debunked many of the myths that circulated about Ruth during his lifetime. He was not an orphan. He did not contract syphilis from his profligate ways. In fact, his sexual (and gustatory) exploits were highly exaggerated (Leavy 2018; Wehrle 2018). He neither invented nor profited from the Baby Ruth candy bar that was named, in all likelihood, after him. While scholars have been interested in separating fact from fiction, they have been less concerned with exploring the myths surrounding Ruth to understand the role religion played in his story. While they occasionally resort to the use of religious terminology (saints and saviors, worship and ritual), they have not engaged the concepts of religious studies in understanding his significance. The literature on Ruth has underplayed his role in what some describe as “the religion of baseball.” The meaning of Ruth’s own religious and ethnic identity as a Catholic in this era also remains unexplored. In this paper, I delineate the sacred dimensions of Ruth as king and savior of baseball. I demonstrate how that narrative fits in the larger American civil religion as it was being transformed from pastoral to urban and expanded from Puritan and Protestant to include ethnic

immigrant Catholic and Jewish. Finally, I argue that Ruth's Catholic identity formed the basis for his canonical roles as Patron Saint of Children, repentant sinner, and champion of the poor and weak and how, because of Ruth, those elements of Catholic religion became part of American civil religion.

2. Babe Ruth and the Religion of Baseball

If sport has become the national religion, Babe Ruth is the patron saint. He stands at the heart of the game he played, the promise of a warm summer night, a bag of peanuts, and a beer. And just maybe, the longest ball ever hit out of the park.

(Montville 2006, p. 367)

There is a robust literature that argues both for and against applying the category of religion to secular phenomena such as sports (Novak 1976; Bain-Selbo and Sapp 2016; Grano 2017; Higgs and Braswell 2004; Prebish 1993). If, however, we agree with current scholarship that asserts that the religion–secular divide is not a useful way to understand complex societies, then deploying the category of religion to explain the power sports have on the human psyche can be a useful tool. We need not argue whether sports are religions to assert that they can achieve the same ends as systems traditionally defined as religions. Sports do what religions do: they help people make meaning in their lives by developing communal allegiances, honoring holy figures, providing a locus for emotions such as ecstasy and despair, and experiencing the sacred in particular objects, stories, and values (Laderman 2009; Chidester 2005; Trothen 2015). Scholars have long recognized that baseball, in particular, fulfills these functions (Novak 1976; Price 2006; Evans and Herzog 2002). And Babe Ruth, as Montville suggests, is baseball's "patron saint."

Ruth gained this status by his prodigious feats of athleticism. Although he began his professional baseball career as a pitcher (and was masterful at that position as well as every other position he played in his youth), his outstanding accomplishment was hitting a baseball for greater distance and with greater regularity than anyone had ever done (Smelser 1993; Leavy 2018). Before Ruth, a home run was an accidental occurrence. Baseball was a game that highlighted the strategies of moving runners from base to base. Scores were low. Ruth changed the game by trying to hit home runs and succeeding beyond the wildest measure (Leavy 2018). Stout (2016) called Ruth's home runs a "wonderful surprise" that sold newspapers and amazed fans. He could do this because he had superior reflexes and eyesight. Sports medicine experts deemed him a "neuromuscular genius" (Leavy 2018, p. 305). He also worked at perfecting his signature craft, and more than likely experienced the ecstasy of athletes scholars describe as "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi 1990) and "pure joy" (Pipkin 2008) as an integral part of this experience that pleased him and those who watched in awe (Leavy 2018).

Ruth's home runs became a spiritual experience that inspired wonder in those who observed him, initially because of the novelty and ultimately because of the majesty. Seeing Ruth hit home runs was also a common occurrence, even before the days of television, because Ruth played baseball not only during the regular season but also before and after, almost all year round. He "barnstormed;" that is, he toured with a team he organized, often called "The Bustin' Babes" and played games against other major leaguers (often Yankee teammate Lou Gehrig's "Larrupin' Lous") and semi-pro and amateur teams (white and black) after the season ended. He also played exhibition games before the season began up and down the east coast, so many admirers in small towns across the country were able to witness him hitting in person. (Many who could not possibly have done so claimed to nevertheless.) Spectators came not to see the game, but to experience a Babe Ruth home run. He rarely disappointed them (Creamer 2005; Montville 2006).

Numbers are sacred in religious traditions. Ruth's home run numbers were no exception. In 1927 he reached his highest season total, 60. That number became sacrosanct, to the extent that when another Yankee, Roger Maris, hit 61 home runs in 1961, there was such an uproar that legend had an asterisk placed next to his accomplishment in "the record book" so as not to detract from Ruth's record even as Maris surpassed it. Maris also received death threats for challenging Babe's immortal record,

but nowhere near as many as when a black athlete, Henry Aaron, surpassed Ruth's lifetime record of 714 home runs. The holiness that was attached to Ruth was palpable and powerful. Even his uniform number, 3, became part of the lore, even though it only marked his place in the Yankee batting order and had no particular meaning to him.

His home runs also created a world of sacred objects and spaces. The bats and the balls he willingly autographed in quantity and for whomever asked became not only prized possessions, but relics (Montville 2006). Stories abound of Ruth's generosity in passing these objects on to the boys and men who waited patiently for them and preserved them with the sanctity they deserved (Smelser 1993).

Yankee Stadium was the sacred space that would come to be known as "The House that Ruth Built." It was designed to highlight his talents:

The Stadium was a grand monument to the drawing powers of the resident right fielder. Did the Romans ever build a stadium simply to show off the talents of one gladiator? And if they did, did they—as the Yankees did—situate the playing surface so the late-afternoon sun always would be behind their star attraction, not shining in his eyes? (Montville 2006, p. 174)

It was also where his body lay in state after his death. Ken Burns' film *Baseball* documents that many New York children believed that Ruth was buried under the stadium monument that was subsequently erected in his memory (Burns et al. 2004). His birthplace and actual grave are also holy pilgrimage sites, as is his birthplace, now a museum in Baltimore, and the Baseball Hall of Fame where visitors still go to see his locker, gloves, bats, balls, and uniforms (Leavy 2018). As with any saint, things he touched were imbued with a sacred power.

Ruth was not only a saint, he was called the king, another expression of his sacred status that marked the connection between royalty and divinity that was more prevalent in that era than it is today. He was frequently depicted in cartoon sketches wearing a crown and ermine cape. He was often referred to as a "demigod." The press came up with alliterative epithets for Ruth that alluded to his power and his regal presence, not unlike the traditions in Judaism and Islam of making elaborate lists of names that express the awesome power and majesty of God. The most famous title for Ruth was "Sultan of Swat" but there were countless more. Here's a sample:

Colossus of Clouters, Sultan of Swat, Son of Sock, Caliph of Crash, Goliath of Swat, Mastodonic Mauler, Knight of Swat, Master Mauler, Bazoo of Bang, Maryland Mauler, Rajah of Rap, Baron of Bam, Tarzan of the Diamond, and Batterin' Bambino. (Wehrle 2018, p. 55)

Ruth was also widely understood as baseball's savior. He not only transformed the game as played on the field by redefining the role of the home run but also changed the narrative about baseball's role in society. The association between baseball and gambling was prevalent in the early years of the twentieth century. It was not only a rough (and sometimes violent) game on the field, but a corrupt one off the field. Ruth's miraculous home run output in 1920 and 1921 became the story that newspapers reported most frequently, overshadowing accounts of the "Black Sox scandal" in 1919 (Wehrle 2018). Ruth's accomplishments sold more newspapers than the story of several Chicago White Sox players accepting money from gamblers to throw the World Series. In providing a distraction from this story, Ruth changed baseball's reputation and thereby received credit for its salvation (Smelser 1993). In its secular meaning, Ruth definitely saved baseball from the harm this scandal caused. But the Christian meaning of salvation, being saved from sin, also applies here, as gambling on sports was indeed considered sinful, and it was Ruth who provided redemption.

Of course, the true redemption of baseball from the sin of gambling was in the hands of the newly appointed authoritarian commissioner, Judge Kennesaw Mountain Landis, who was hired by team owners to bring a new era and aura to baseball. Part of Landis' task was to end gambling, punish players who broke rules (including Babe Ruth) and make the game more palatable to a middle-class audience. But Ruth's savior role should not be underestimated (Smelser 1993). He changed the game not only with his ability but also with his personality and larger than life self-presentation.

Landis represented authority; Ruth represented joy. As one scholar suggested, “Landis ruled the state; Ruth ruled the people” (Stoloff 2008, p. 91). No doubt, he was baseball’s King and the Savior in the eyes of the public.

Ruth’s god-like powers on the baseball field also extended to the legendary “curse of the Bambino” that changed the baseball fortunes for the city of Boston and the Red Sox. The curse was punishment for the sin committed by the Boston Red Sox in 1919 when they sold Babe Ruth’s contract to the New York Yankees. Popular lore imagines that for 86 years the Red Sox failed to win a World Series because they foolishly cast out the Babe (Shaughnessy 1990). The story has been explained in biblical terms as baseball’s original sin where Boston is Eden, Ruth Adam and the Boston owner, Harry Frazee, the serpent (Ardolino 2004). Given that Ruth, like Adam, had no power to determine where he played, and had settled happily in Boston, he was not the villain. Frazee, “the snake,” who made the deal, was blamed for endangering the future of the team by selling Ruth for purely financial reasons. That Ruth was difficult to manage may have been part of the consideration as well, but the story is rarely framed to put the blame on him (Stout 2016). Ruth was coveted, not hated by Boston’s fans. People believed he had the power to end the curse, even after his death. Rituals at his former home in Sudbury to exhume a piano he legendarily heaved into a lake and countless tales of propitiations and incantations at his gravesite serve to reinforce the Babe’s supernatural powers to save Boston as he saved baseball (Shaughnessy 1990).

3. American Civil Religion and Catholic Identity

He will be the patron saint of American possibility. (Montville 2006, p. 13)

Ruth was central to the fabric of American mythology beyond the confines of the baseball diamond. While his abilities made him a baseball god, his personality and life experiences made him, if not a god, a dominant figure in the fabric of the American society of the 1920s. Recovering from the difficulties of the World War and on the cusp of Depression, America needed a singular hero to celebrate. Ruth fulfilled that role. He was a man of extraordinary powers in a country that was beginning to see itself as a world power. By the end of the 1920s, Ruth was rated in polls as the most famous American behind only Washington and Lincoln (Smelser 1993). During the Depression, he joked that he made more money than the President did because he was better at his job (Smelser 1993). He was America’s “everyman,” easy to relate to across geographical and class differences. His family was merchant class, and he was raised as working poor, but as baseball’s most heralded and best player (and through wise management of his salary) he became rich (Montville 2006). His rise from humble origins to wealthy sports hero made Ruth the paradigmatic Horatio Alger for his time. In religious terms, he exemplified the Protestant myth of the Prosperity Gospel that equated economic success with morality and goodness. Additionally, the style of play that Ruth introduced to baseball demonstrated a Muscular Christianity that equated athletic prowess with Protestant valor.

Ruth, however, did not subscribe to the Protestant civil religious teachings of the prosperity gospel or the muscular Christianity that extolled athletic prowess, hard work, and economic success as signs of piety. Ruth’s story is not a celebration of the Protestant values of the American civil religion as he was not Protestant but Catholic. Ruth’s Catholic identity brings a new perspective that expands American civil religion to include the religious practices and beliefs of ethnic immigrants.

Although ethnic Catholics had achieved acceptance by the end of the nineteenth century, the Catholic religion was still approached with skepticism and fear throughout the 1920s. Concerns about foreign (papal) influence made people apprehensive about Catholic loyalties to foreign entities. Unfamiliarity with the intricacies of Catholic ritual (often seen as superstitious) and distrust of clerical celibacy also played a role (Smith 2010; Steinfels 2004). Ruth’s popularity, however, was part of a process that would make Catholic teachings and rituals an acceptable part of the story of America and provided a new dimension to American civil religion.

Ruth had a strong and very public Catholic identity. Ruth’s father was of Lutheran background, but his mother was a practicing Catholic. His parents were occupied with other matters: his father

owned a bar and his mother suffered from ill health, and young George was too much for them to handle. He was sent away from home at age seven, and his parents did not have much influence on his upbringing after that (Smelser 1993). Ruth's religious identity was formed as a boarding student at St. Mary's Industrial School run by the Catholic order of St. Francis Xavier. The lay Catholic order of Xaverian Brothers who lived and taught at St. Mary's were his models and mentors. Ruth lived there for twelve years and the Brothers were his legal guardians for his entire youth. He received training in Catholic doctrine and attended Mass on a daily basis. At his confirmation, he took the middle name Herman after Brother Herman, the head of Athletics (Smelser 1993).

Baseball was played widely in Catholic schools at the time because of the influence of Irish Catholic professional ballplayers (Campmier 2018). Baseball played a role in the moral and social development of Catholic youth, teaching them both discipline and skills. Ruth played baseball daily at St. Mary's, and the Brothers were attentive to his superior talents. Brother Matthias, who was in charge of discipline and worked in the athletic program became his mentor (Montville 2006). For the rest of his life, Ruth was connected to the school. He visited regularly, brought their band to play at ballparks where he barnstormed, and supported the school financially (Smelser 1993).

After leaving St. Mary's, Ruth remained devoted not only to the institution, but to his Catholic faith. In Catholicism, he found a set of allegiances to maintain, rules to follow (or not), and rituals to observe that were comfortable and comforting. He was a member of the Knights of Columbus. He became a very public supporter of Catholic philanthropic causes such as Boys Town and the Monterey-Fresno-Catholic Diocesan Campaign (Leavy 2018). He attended Mass and tithed conspicuously, albeit irregularly (Montville 2006). Both of his weddings took place in the Church. He stayed married to his first wife Helen, even though they were estranged, obeying Catholic rules against divorce. When Helen died tragically, Ruth demonstrated his grief immediately by attending mass at St. Cecilia's Church where he was seen "fingering his big brown rosary which has numerous relics from the Shrine of St. Ann de Beaupre enclosed on cross" (Wehrle 2018, p. 187). Whenever Ruth found himself in trouble for insubordination on the baseball field or for his pursuits of pleasure off the field, a Catholic figure of note, often with ties to St. Mary's, was brought in to counsel and support him (Montville 2006).

It is also possible that Ruth's one foray into politics, his open support of Al Smith's Presidential campaign in 1928, had something to do with his affinity for Smith as a Catholic whom he saw as a kindred spirit. He was publicly critical of those who opposed Smith on the grounds of "petty prejudice" and admired his stance against Prohibition (Wehrle 2018).

By the mid-1930s, Catholicism had become more widely accepted in American popular culture (Smith 2010). At the same time, Ruth's baseball career was in decline. When his prodigious abilities began to wane with age, the Yankees no longer needed him. They refused to grant his wishes to manage the team, claiming he did not have the skills required to lead (Wehrle 2018). He ended his career with the Red Sox and then later worked with the Brooklyn Dodgers as an assistant coach, retiring in 1935. But he could no longer hit and was no longer the box office draw (Leavy 2018) and the experiences ended badly. He spent his last years doing charitable work, lending his name to and traveling on behalf of a variety of causes. Cancer cut short his life after baseball. As he was dying, baseball embraced him once again with tributes and accolades recalling his glorious career (Leavy 2018). In these final years, Ruth claimed to have relied on Catholicism to "get [his] house in order" (Ruth and Considine 1948, p. 230).

Ruth's death, funeral, and burial were conducted with Catholic rites and traditions. He kept a statue of Martin de Porres (patron saint of mixed-race people and founder of orphanages) at his hospital bedside during his last hospital stay, and many rosaries and pennies for mass arrived from fans who wished him well. He received last rites

from Father Thomas H. Kaufman, which some members of the faith felt he didn't deserve. Kaufman, a Dominican priest from St. Catherine of Siena parish, was filling in for a priest who was on vacation. He was from Baltimore and had spent one troubled night at St. Mary's as a boy. (Leavy 2018, p. 458)

After his death on 16 August 1948 Ruth lay in state at Yankee Stadium, “with black rosary beads wound around his thick fingers” and a massive crucifix and vigil candle at one end of the coffin (Leavy 2018, p. 468). There were so many fans (estimates ranged from 77,000–250,000) who wanted to file past his coffin to say good-bye that the Stadium was kept open overnight and into the next day to accommodate them (Leavy 2018).

Ruth’s funeral took place at St. Patrick’s Cathedral on 20 August, with Cardinal Francis Spellman and a retinue of forty-four priests presiding. Newspapers covering the event described the solemn ritual in detail, including how “the Cardinal descended from his throne, walked slowly to the foot of the coffin, and gave the final absolution” (Feinberg 1948).

Newspapers reported that over 100,000 people lined the funeral route to Ruth’s final resting place at the Catholic Cemetery, Gate of Heaven, in Valhalla, New York. Jane Leavy described his tombstone:

There’s nothing subtle or understated about the gravesite, dwarfed as it is by a sandblasted statue in Westerly granite of Jesus blessing a young baseball player. It is engraved with the words of Cardinal Spellman: ‘May the Divine Spirit That Animated Babe Ruth to Win the Crucial Game of Life Inspire the Youth’. (Leavy 2018, p. 476)

Ruth’s grave tells the story of his life as an American Catholic. His spirit lives on in Spellman’s words and is contained in both the images of the boy and the Christ. By the time of Ruth’s death, the pomp of Catholic religious ceremony had been integrated into the fabric of American life and Ruth may be credited in part for the level of acceptance it achieved.

4. Ruth’s Catholic Commitments

Babe Ruth was a public celebrity, a hero for the ages. Some of his fame came from his prodigious accomplishments in a game that he helped to elevate the national pastime and American society’s growing interest in sports. Some of his fame was because this transpired as America transitioned from a rural to an urban centered society while Ruth was living and working in the greatest urban area, New York. His broad popularity can be attributed to the new media that made Ruth accessible: talking pictures, newsreels, newspaper images, and the sports pages that featured daily articles about the Babe’s exploits by some of the leading writers of the day, including Damon Runyan, Bob Considine, and Paul Gallico, not to mention Ruth’s own ghost-written columns. Scholars, most notably Leavy (2018), have focused on the contribution of his agent, Christy Walsh, who was responsible for turning Ruth into a celebrity in the new mediated consumer culture. Part of Walsh’s genius was presenting Ruth in familiar mythic poses that emphasized Ruth’s status as baseball’s king and savior.

While the religious motifs made Ruth a god of the religion of baseball, his public identification as a Catholic brought a new dimension to the civil religion of America. Ruth’s main religious significance lies in three key aspects of his life, expressed in the mythic language of Catholic traditions. As his tombstone suggests, Ruth functioned as the patron saint of children, best illustrated through the Johnny Sylvester legend. His propensity towards immature behavior, pleasure seeking, and public apology corresponds to the Catholic pattern of sin and repentance. The ways Ruth challenged authority when he thought he or others were being treated unfairly made him a champion of economic justice and a proponent of what came to be known as the preferential option for the poor, a newly developing dimension of Catholic doctrine.

5. Patron Saint of Children

George Herman Ruth’s nickname was bestowed on him when, as a teen, he left St. Mary’s to play professional baseball. His new guardian, Jack Dunn, was described as having this “babe” playing for him (Smelser 1993). The name stuck and perpetuated an overemphasis on Ruth’s childlike demeanor (Wehrle 2018). Close associates called him “Jidge” or sometimes less flattering names (Montville 2006). He called everyone “kid,” perhaps to level the playing field (Creamer 2005). But as much as Babe was

the baseball playing child represented on his tombstone, he was also the Christ-like figure who cared for and blessed children and was credited with healing powers.

Ruth took his role as patron saint of children very seriously. In his ghost-written columns, he sometimes took on the role of moral counsellor, offering advice to America's youth that often focused on fair play and teamwork (Wehrle 2018). He cheerfully autographed baseballs with the beautiful penmanship he learned at St. Mary's (Montville 2006). He seemed happiest surrounded by boys who saw him as their hero. His visits to children in orphanages and hospitals were well documented and achieved the status of legend (Montville 2006).

There are many stories of children being restored to health through Ruth's magic touch (Lloyd 1976). Ruth's connection to children transitioned to sainthood when he performed a "miracle" for Johnny Sylvester (Leavy 2018). The story brought heightened attention to Ruth's large and magnanimous relationship to poor and ailing children by encapsulating it in a story that highlighted its mythic dimensions even though it featured a well-to-do and not very ill boy. As with all myths, this one contains a kernel of truth. But its embellishment provides a more interesting window into the religious significance of Babe Ruth for American culture and illustrates how Ruth helped to integrate and normalize Catholic religious ideas such as miracles, once assumed to be mere superstitions, into America's civil religion.

Johnny Sylvester was an eleven-year-old boy from a wealthy family who had been thrown from a horse and suffered complications while recovering at home in Essex Falls, New York. Johnny was a big baseball fan. Knowing that autographed baseballs would cheer his son up, his father contacted friends in St. Louis where the Yankees were about to play the Cardinals in the 1926 World Series. Ruth's publicists sent balls signed by the Yankees and Cardinals with a note from Ruth promising Johnny he would hit a home run for him. When Ruth hit three World Series home runs, the story of Ruth's keeping a promise to a sick boy began to circulate in the press. The story escalated when the reports began to allege that Johnny made a miraculous recovery as a result of Ruth's intervention. After the World Series, *The Daily News* kept up the attention, by arranging for Ruth to go visit Johnny as he recovered. Ruth happily complied, stopping in Essex Falls on his way to a barnstorming game against the Negro League Brooklyn Royal Giants (Wehrle 2018; Leavy 2018).

Johnny Sylvester's recovery went down in baseball annals as a miracle attributed to Ruth. The story was fashioned in ways similar to miracles that are the requirement for sainthood in the Catholic Church. For a miracle to be attributed to a Catholic who is nominated for beatification, a team of experts must certify that miraculous recovery was based on scientific evidence and attributable to prayers made to the would-be saint. Sylvester himself achieved fame as "Babe Ruth's kid" as his obituary attests (Thomas 1990). He was brought to Ruth's bedside when the Babe was dying to further embellish the legend and make the promise of healing reciprocal.

The story of Babe Ruth's home runs and their saving power became an even more powerful myth when Hollywood took it over. It found its way into *Pride of the Yankees* (Goldwyn et al. 2008), the film about Ruth's rival and teammate, Lou Gehrig. *Pride of the Yankees* was made in 1942 immediately after Gehrig's death from what came to be known inaccurately as "Lou Gehrig Disease." The film was nominated for the Academy Award for best picture, and starred Gary Cooper as Gehrig while Ruth played himself quite credibly. In 1942, Ruth was a household word, and Gehrig not as well known. Having Babe in the film sold tickets. And, not surprisingly, the film adapted the Johnny Sylvester miracle story to suit its purposes. The scene where Ruth and Gehrig visit "Billy" in the hospital before a World Series game makes Gehrig, not Ruth, the hero. Ruth promises to hit a home run for Billy, but Gehrig additionally engages with the boy, encouraging him, and promises two home runs that, of course, he hits. When Gehrig is dying, Billy shows up to inspire him and let him know that thanks to Gehrig's encouragement he learned to walk again.

Hollywood embellished and degraded the legend even more in the 1948 *Babe Ruth Story* (Del Ruth 1948) that was made just before Ruth died. Here, the Sylvester miracle is conflated with Ruth's other "miracle" home run, known as "the called shot." Legend has it that Ruth pointed

to the outfield (center or right) and then hit a home run to that spot in the 1932 World Series against Chicago. No one can actually recall seeing this occur (including President Roosevelt who attended the game) and Ruth would never affirm or deny having predicted the shot (Ruth and Considine 1948). In the film, the Johnny character is in the hospital, dying, hears on the radio that Ruth pointed and hit that home run for him, and recovers. The film attributes other miracles to Ruth and his healing powers with children that do not even have the kernel of truth necessary for a myth to take root. The film is considered by critics among the worst movies ever made (Montville 2006) and reduces Babe to a well-meaning boob, not the saintly patron of children that he actually was. Nonetheless, Ruth's miracles for children made this Catholic belief a more acceptable part of American civil religion.

6. Repentant Sinner

Was Ruth, as Smelser (1993) aptly describes the sides of Ruth's personality, more the "Baltimore waterfront slob" or the "Xaverian Brother George"? Recent scholarship has shown that tales of his hedonistic behavior were wildly exaggerated (Wehrle 2018). Ruth began his life as the "Baltimore waterfront slob" and as Ruth's world broadened from his Baltimore roots, he had to learn to deal with fame and fortune. The Catholic paradigm of repentant sinner describes the process Ruth frequently underwent as he learned and experimented, and then saw (or was made to see) the error of his ways.

Leigh Montville described Ruth's pattern this way:

The Catholic religion would stay with him, the rhythm of mistakes and redemption perfect for his life of rapidly accumulated venial sins. Three Our Fathers, three Hail Mary's, and a good Act of Contrition would clear out his moral digestive system and set him back on the road. He would amaze teammates sometimes when he would appear at Mass in the Morning after a night of indulgence. Three Our Fathers, three Hail Marys, a good Act of Contrition, a \$50 bill in the collection basket, ready to go. (p. 29)

The pattern of Ruth attaining a god-like status in the eyes of his fans (worshippers) and then failing to live up to expectations followed him throughout his career. While still with the Red Sox, he got into a fight with the manager, Ed Barrow, about his late-night carousing. After Barrow suspended him, "a chagrined Ruth went to his manager as if he was going to confession at St. Mary's and apologized" (Stout 2016, p. 120). In 1922, he fought publicly with Judge Landis over breaking a rule about barnstorming, and ended up apologizing and accepting his punishment. The rest of the season was also difficult for Ruth, who was suspended and fined several more times for arguing with umpires and other displays of temper. He played poorly in the World Series, and the popular politician, soon-to-be mayor of New York, Jimmy Walker, scolded him publicly for letting down the youth of America. His response to Walker was to weep openly and promise to set a better example (Smelser 1993).

The most dramatic episode in this cycle of sin and repentance took place in 1925. Ruth came to spring training seriously out of shape and overweight. He suffered from a malady that sports writers variously identified as a groin injury, an infection, syphilis, and alcohol-related behavioral problems. They called it "the bellyache heard round the world" and attributed it to his overindulgence. Whatever the cause, he collapsed during spring training and was taken by train to New York where he was hospitalized at St. Vincent's for six weeks. He did not play regularly until June and did not play up to the levels he had achieved earlier in his career. At age 30, it was rumored that his good years were behind him. Yet when he returned, he played well if not up to his earlier prodigious levels. But he also fought with his manager, Miller Huggins, refused to follow curfew rules, and often arrived late and sullen to games. Late in the season, Huggins suspended him, and Ruth did not react well. In response to his protests, the Yankee front office supported Huggins, not their star player. Again, Ruth the sinner took the role of penitent quite seriously. He and his advisers brought Brother Matthias to counsel him. Ruth swore to reform his behavior, and publicly presented his mentor with a Cadillac to thank him for raising him to be "Xaverian Brother George" (Leavy 2018).

Ruth truly took his repentance to heart. He spent the winter in a new scientifically-based health regimen at the McGovern Gym in New York City that got him into shape for the 1926 season. He arrived at spring training in excellent condition and began to play as or more magnificently than he had in his peak years from 1921–1924. His agent, Christy Walsh, crafted many of Ruth's ghost-written columns as apologies for his misbehavior, describing at length how Ruth was taking responsibility for his actions. With his redemption came an even greater commitment to boys in poverty (Leavy 2018). Among other efforts, he got involved in the Father Flanagan campaign to keep farmers from hiring poor boys in harvest seasons and then not compensating them (Wehrle 2018).

Ruth was a fallen hero, but playing on the theme of repentance and with the support of good advisors such as Walsh and Claire Hodgson (who would later become his second wife) he was able to redeem himself. Although many writers (and the Yankee organization) still viewed him as "the Baltimore waterfront slob" and bad boy, he was, in the eyes of the many who saw him as the god of baseball, truly an example of a good, repentant Catholic, "Xaverian Brother George." Ruth introduced this cycle of sin and repentance that one might call "muscular Catholicism" into the vocabulary of American civil religion.

7. Babe Ruth and the Catholic Doctrine of Preferential Option for the Poor

In the second half of the twentieth century, Catholic liberation theology developed the doctrine of a preferential option for the poor. Following the teachings of the Prophets of the Hebrew Bible and Jesus in the Gospels, Catholic ethicists argued that because God favored the poor and the weak (often represented by widows and orphans), humans were obligated to do so as well. Babe Ruth's actions made him a forerunner of these Catholic ideals. Although in American civil religion, Ruth represented the Protestant gospel of prosperity, Ruth's behavior towards blacks, women and the poor fit more clearly with this Catholic doctrine. This emphasis on doing for others was the antithesis of the gospel of prosperity that encouraged economic success for one's own salvation. Ruth also questioned the authority of baseball's overlords. To Jane Leavy, he was the "rule breaker in chief" (p. 102).

There is no doubt that Ruth was widely loved by Americans as the king and savior of baseball. But he had his detractors, especially those among baseball's powerful who saw Ruth as the sinner, the "Baltimore waterfront slob," who had to be kept in line. The journalists and players who criticized him mocked not only his class background, but also questioned the purity of his whiteness. Ruth never backed away from his roots in poverty. Although there is no evidence to suggest that Ruth came from African stock, he often expressed his affinity with America's blacks (Leavy 2018).

Ruth was frequently the subject of racial invective. Along with the nicknames that emphasized his divine powers, there were other epithets hurled at him that suggested that Ruth came by those powers because he was of African descent, and, according to racial stereotypes, had beast-like power. He was called N—Lips by teammates in Boston in reference to his wide nose, thick lips, and swarthy complexion. The innuendos around his orphan status (that he always denied), his inability to control his emotions, and his sexual prowess supported racist stereotypes (Montville 2006). One minister in Boston connected the curse of the Bambino with New England racism, arguing that Boston should have paid for that sin (Shaughnessy 1990).

Ruth did not like the taunts, but he would not be cowed by them. Nor did it affect his approach towards African Americans with whom he maintained close relationships throughout his life. While he was far from a civil rights activist, he publicly supported black causes and institutions. He lent his name to fundraising efforts for black churches and frequently visited segregated orphanages and hospitals (Wehrle 2018). More than other white players of the era, he barnstormed against (and occasionally played with) Negro League teams, befriended their players, and spoke highly and publicly of their baseball abilities (Leavy 2018).

Ruth also demonstrated respect for women. While he exemplified muscular Christianity to America, his own masculinity was not of the muscular kind. Although raised in the exclusive company of men and boys as St. Mary's, Ruth clearly preferred the company of women as an adult. While he

was not faithful to his first wife, most of his sexual exploits remained unsubstantiated (Wehrle 2018). He respectfully refused to divorce Helen for reasons of both religion and compassion. Like Ruth's mother, Helen was not mentally stable. When they separated, he continued to provide for her and the daughter she (likely) adopted when they were estranged. He had the utmost respect for his second wife, Claire Hodgson, and her mother and daughter with whom Ruth remained close (Montville 2006).

Claire helped Ruth "repent." Under her guidance, he became a fully developed model of "Xaverian Brother George." Once married, she set him on a regimen of healthy living that he willingly obeyed. The press sometimes depicted him as a boy who had found a mother to care for him (Wehrle 2018). As he settled down during his second marriage, they could no longer deploy the male-dominant narrative of Ruth as profligate adventurer, drunk, and playboy. In this marriage, Ruth displayed a willingness to challenge gender norms. It is possible that this willingness to cede the upper hand to his wife was a factor in Ruth not achieving the goal he had set for himself, to become a major league manager, as owners could portray him as childishly subordinating himself to a woman (Wehrle 2018).

When a woman pitcher, Jackie Mitchell of the Chattanooga Lookouts, struck Ruth out during an exhibition game, Ruth was a willing participant in the story. As the *New York Times* reported, he swung and missed at two balls, asked for the ball to be inspected, "just as batters do when utterly baffled by a pitcher's delivery." He struck out on a called third strike, "flung his bat away and trudged to the bench, registering disgust with his shoulders and chin" (Brandt 1931, p. 32). Whether or not the event was a publicity stunt, Ruth played his role. Allowing a woman to best him in public required a willingness to challenge the stereotypes of gender and a chivalrous acceptance of a different kind of masculinity.

Finally, Ruth's preference for the poor manifested itself in his continuous struggles with baseball's owning class over the rights of players to control their own economic destinies. He was an early supporter of a players' union when he first entered professional baseball. He fought annually with management in Boston and New York over his compensation (Smelser 1993). Although Ruth got a handsome salary, it was clear that team owners profited even more handsomely from Ruth. He was primarily responsible for building the popularity of the game and that translated into gate and residual receipts vastly higher than what he was paid (Wehrle 2018). He made more money off-season selling his name than he did during the season as a player (Leavy 2018). He rebelled against a reserve system that treated players like indentured servants, tying them to teams for life contracts if the team so chose. He also criticized his fellow players when they did not treat each other well, as in 1932 when Chicago Cubs refused to share their bonuses equitably. As Edmund Wehrle concludes:

Compared to athletes in other sports, Ruth was underpaid. No one could reasonably argue that Ruth received a fair share of the income he generated for his sport. Ruppert, as team owner, and Barrow, as team secretary and owner of a share of the Yankees, profited immeasurably from Ruth. With some cause, Ruth carried a working-class view of the world and a strong impulse to defend the value of his labor and the value of baseball players in general. (p. 166)

8. Conclusions

Looking at George Herman "Babe" Ruth from the perspective of religion, we find a baseball god and exemplar of Catholic values. Ruth recreated the game of baseball with his majestic powers, inspiring awe and love from fans. The home runs he hit forever changed the way the game was played. Ruth died over half a century ago, yet his name remains a household word and the symbol of baseball's importance in society. As the paradigmatic American hero of his time, he also changed the view of Catholic rites and rituals, helping to normalize Catholic religious beliefs and making them an acceptable part of American civil religion. He brought attention to Catholic values of love for children, forgiveness, and support for economic and social justice that are still important today and should forever be associated with the King of Baseball, Babe Ruth.

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