

Article

# Foucault for Heisman: College Football and the Liturgies of Power

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**Abstract:** This essay attempts to give a new sort of answer to the question of whether or not sport and sports fandom are a religion through the work of Foucault on “power.” Looking specifically at college football in North America, I examine the ways in which Foucault’s different variations of power have and still do function within what we call “big-time” college football. I thus proffer that Foucault’s *oeuvre* helps us to see the sport and religion question in a new way—not as two phenomena similar in practice but in modes of power. I conclude by offering suggestions for how Foucault’s work might offer suggestions for imagining new configurations of collegiate athletics and its governance.

**Keywords:** Foucault; college football; power; normalization; discipline; liturgy

## 1. Introduction

Perhaps this is too bold, but I think the question of whether or not sport is a religion has become a bit tired. Scholars of far greater merit and ingenuity than myself have analyzed such a question from just about every conceivable angle. The answer seems to be a bit yes and a bit no, and it mostly depends upon how we define the terms in question. Sport certainly bears notable similarities to religion that shed new light on both sport and religion. Sport bears, as Wittgenstein would say, a “family resemblance” to religion in many important respects (Wittgenstein 2009, p. 67). Yet sport also, at least in my mind, does not *explicitly* seek the fundamental transformation of personal and communal identity to which religions, as performed phenomena, aspire. I say this as one who has, on many occasions, found myself experiencing something like ecstasy while watching sport. American college football, in particular, has been my obsession since childhood. That sport is certainly one of the riper areas for comparison to religion, as Eric Bain-Selbo has so helpfully detailed, but I still feel, even if I cannot adequately articulate precisely why, that there is a real difference between the joy of football and the experiences of spirituality (Bain-Selbo 2012). In other words, sport and religion bear a family resemblance—they are clearly kin, as we say in the South—but no one ought to mistake them for the *same* member of the family.

In this essay, I want to try and use college football to stake out a different way of thinking about the religious aspects of sport. The question of religion and sport, in light of this particular North American example, must shift from a focus on parallels in *form of practice* to a focus on parallels in *modes of power*. While there is clear value in the communal practice of spirituality, there is also a notable dark side, that is, when institutions seize upon the power of embodied practice to work on the soul through the body, as Foucault would put it. It is not, in other words, so much that sport looks a lot like religion in its crafting of physical space, its embodied practices, or its search for transcendence. What matters more in describing the family resemblance between religion and sport is more the way in which power functions within those banal similarities.

Thus, this essay will investigate the manner in which sport, particularly college football, functions like forms of religion in the way that power is imposed upon subjects via embodied practice. My thesis, to put it plainly, is that collegiate athletics functions as a regime of what Foucault called “disciplinary

normalization,” meaning that the particular form of governance leveraged upon college athletes, from the institutional seat of the N.C.A.A. to the more intimate work of the nutritional staff in their home athletic department, works to mold athletes into a presupposed norm. The “liturgies,” as I will call them, of big-time college football function as circuits of normalization that seek to form the soul by imposing discipline upon the body.

This Foucauldian approach is useful for several reasons. First, it will help explain some of the seemingly contradictory or hypocritical behavior of those in authority over amateur athletes. Incidents of N.C.A.A. violations or of public uproar that seem incoherent or irrational, when seen under the lens of normalization, suddenly make a great deal more sense. Second, and more importantly, examining the sport-religion connection based on parallels in power rather than practice will help illuminate new manners of imagining how amateur athletics might be governed. Foucault called freedom the art of “voluntary inservitude” (Newman 2015). I believe a genealogy of college football opens up the horizon for thinking the future of big-time college sports as imbued with just this sort of inservitude.

How then to proceed? Obviously, a full genealogy of North American collegiate athletics, not to mention college football alone, is beyond the scope of this essay. What I want to do instead is to try and show the particular ways that normalizing power works in college football by detailing the content of the norm for college football and contemporary practices that attempt to produce it. So first, I want to sketch Foucault’s conception of normalizing power, its effects, and the ways in which those effects are seen in its deployment within monastic life. Second, I want to give a brief sketch of the origins of college football as it relates to this prior analysis of normalizing power. I hope to show the deep family resemblance between the two, particularly the way in which college football was seen as a means of good health and as a means of training in virtue. I then also want to speak to the ways in which these liturgies of normalization, as I will call them, still continue today. Indeed, my ultimate claim is that religious studies can bear fruit for the study of college football (and sport in general) not because it is a sort of crypto-religion but because it is governed by and through a particularly religious mode of power. Finally, I will conclude with a brief sketch of the ways in which Foucault’s work might aid in the attempt to imagine new possibilities for how collegiate athletics as a whole might be governed.

## 2. Foucault on Power

Let me first clarify just what “power” is within Foucault’s larger body of work. Admittedly, this is not a simple task. Foucault went through many iterations on this topic, analyzed the notion within several vastly different contexts, and famously attached several key modifiers to the noun “power” from his first major work *History of Madness* to his final volumes from the *History of Sexuality* trilogy before his untimely death in 1984. Foucault spoke of “disciplinary power,” “normalizing power,” “power/knowledge,” and “biopower,” just to name a few of the more important examples. Yet, within all of these examples, I think the clear “first principle” so to speak, of Foucault’s analysis of power might be a sort of hermeneutic of suspicion of power as transcendent spectacle. In other words, Foucault’s interest in power was to ignore the way that power was often analyzed in a descending order, i.e., we begin from the Sovereign or the State or the Law and we move downward to note the ways in which the ultimate seat of power is able to exercise that power at every level. Foucault favored instead an “ascending analysis of power” (Foucault 2003a, p. 30), whereby we begin with the ordinary ways in which power operates in and through immanent relations and institutions that affect us *now*. Only after such an analysis of the ordinary effects of power can the “higher-ups” so to speak, be taken into account. This passage from the first volume of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* is perhaps his most famous statement of this methodology:

The analysis, made in terms of power, must not assume that the sovereignty of the state, the form of the law, or the overall unity of a domination are given at the outset; rather, these are only the terminal forms power takes. It seems to me that power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through

ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support for which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the laws, in the various social hegemonies. (Foucault 1978, p. 94)

This is obviously a quite convoluted quotation. The point here, I think, is that power is not often thought of as a diffuse reality, but rather, as one fixed point of authority. Foucault's great help to us, is to dismiss precisely this primacy of singular authority in our thinking about power. He continues:

Power's condition of possibility, or in any case the viewpoint which permits one to understand its exercise, even in its more peripheral effects, and which also makes it possible to use its mechanisms as a grid of intelligibility of the social order, must not be sought in the primary existence of a central point, in a unique source of sovereignty from which secondary and descendent forms would emanate; it is the moving substrate of force relations which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power, but the latter are always local and unstable. (Foucault 1978, p. 94)

Hence, one of the most difficult aspects of Foucault's work on power to get a hold of is that power, as the upswell of manifold force relations that operate everywhere and from everyone, never exists without an intention, but this intention or, more often, set of intentions, is never the result of the subjective calculation of one particular subject. The damnable thing about power, according to Foucault, is that one can never pin its effects on a single person or group's willful calculation. Power escapes this simplistic analysis. "Let us not look," so Foucault says, "for the headquarters that presides over [power's] rationality" (Foucault 1978, p. 95). This means, critically, that "resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power," but resistance, rather, operates within the nearly inscrutable multiplicities of power to varying effects. Ultimately, Foucault is trying to resist traditional analyses of power that focus on the will and actions of a sovereign person or group and move, instead, towards a more immanent analysis of power, an account of the everydayness of power in its relational effects among us. Foucault is not, it is vital to say, even interested in proffering a theory of "what power is." In fact, he explicitly denies, in one of his series of lectures, that this is what he is attempting (Foucault 2009, p. 1). To put it in religious terms, you might say that Foucault was on the hunt for a study of power in its "immanent" rather than "transcendent" forms.

Perhaps Foucault's most significant argument with regards to power and its history is that power underwent a dramatic and radical shift in the nascent stages of what we now call modernity. Throughout his work, Foucault invokes one particular example to illustrate what he sees as a pivot point in the shape that power takes among us—that is, the example of lepers and the plague. *History of Madness* has perhaps Foucault's most eloquent description of the plight of lepers:

At the end of the Middle Ages, leprosy disappeared from the Western world. At the edges of the community, at town gates, large, barren, uninhabitable areas appeared, where the disease no longer reigned but its ghost still hovered. For centuries, these spaces would belong to the domain of the inhuman. From the fourteenth to the seventeenth century, by means of strange incantations, they conjured up a new incarnation of evil, another grinning mask of fear, home to the constantly renewed magic of purification and exclusion. (Foucault 2006, p. 3)

In telling the history of our relationship to what Foucault called "unreason," the leper was a perfect encapsulation of the logic that reigned at the beginning of the Classical age—that is, the logic of *exclusion*. Importantly, this logic had a religious correlate. For in the lepers' exclusion, "their existence still made God manifest, as they showed both his anger and his bounty." Foucault puts this even more strongly, "Hieratic witnesses of evil their salvation is assured by their exclusion: in a strange reversal quite opposed to merit and prayers, they are saved by the hand that is not offered. The sinner

who abandons the leper to his fate thereby opens the door to their salvation” (Foucault 2009, p. 6). The disappearance of leprosy, however, did not disperse this logic of exclusion. The role of the one saved by their dispersal from society would shift to a variety of other “abnormals” throughout the beginnings of modernity (Foucault 2003b).

However, in the midst of the Middle Ages, Foucault argues that a new form of power began to emerge. Rather than being characterized by exclusion, exile, and public expulsion, this new mode of power was characterized by its *intimacy* to those upon whom it acted. Foucault’s example here is that of the pandemic or plague. This passage from *Security, Territory, Population* highlights just how different this sort of power was:

The plague regulations formulated at the end of the Middle Ages, in the sixteenth and still in the seventeenth century, give a completely different end, and above all use completely different instruments. These plague regulations involve literally imposing a partitioning grid on the regions and town struck by plague, with regulations indicating when people can go out, how, at what times, what they must do at home, what type of food they must have, prohibiting certain types of contact, requiring them to present themselves to inspectors, and to open their homes to inspectors. We can say that this is a *disciplinary* type of system. (Foucault 2009, p. 10)

Disciplinary power, a power that includes rather than excludes, that establishes a fundamental intimacy rather than distance, a power that utilizes a multiplicity of interventions rather than a single and final one, now begins to take center stage as the predominant mode of power active within the whole economy of human relations.

The text of *Security, Territory, Population* is also quite significant because therein Foucault links two modes of power that one might have been tempted to treat as distinct—namely, disciplinary power and *normalizing* power. You might think of these modes of power as the subjects of Foucault’s two major works on power: *Discipline and Punish*, on the one hand, and *History of Sexuality*, on the other. On the one hand, you have the power just mentioned, a power hellbent on constant surveillance, regulation, and an infinitesimal series of interventions within a given community, however broad or vast. On the other hand, you have the power of normalization—a more socially activated power meant to ostracize abnormality—subject it to a series of rehabilitative mechanisms, and by doing so recreate the border between normalcy and abnormality. As the later publication of Foucault’s lectures at the Collège de France would make clear, however, such a distinction never really existed. “I think it is indisputable, or hardly disputable,” Foucault says, “that discipline normalizes” (Foucault 2009, p. 56). The reader will forgive another quote at length:

Discipline, of course, analyzes and breaks down; it breaks down individuals, places, time, movements, actions, and operations. It breaks them down into components such that they can be seen, on the one hand, and modified on the other . . . That is to say, on this basis it divides the normal from the abnormal. Disciplinary normalization consists first of all in positing a model, an optimal model that is constructed in terms of a certain result, and the operation of disciplinary normalization consists in trying to get people, movements, and actions to conform to this model, the normal being precisely that which can conform to this norm, and the abnormal that which is incapable of conforming to the norm. In other words, it is not the normal and the abnormal that is fundamental and primary in disciplinary normalization, it is the norm. That is, there is an originally prescriptive character of the norm and the determination and identification of the normal and the abnormal becomes possible in relation to this posited norm. (Foucault 2009, pp. 56–57)

To bring our discussion back to the profound shift in modes of power, let me say this in light of the passage above: the great shift that Foucault is chronicling is power’s movement away from exclusion and towards inclusion, away from the aim of excision and towards the *aim of construction*. Power now

takes on a *positive* rather than negative effect. Disciplinary power and normalizing power are not about removing certain types of persons from society but about establishing a *norm* and then acting upon and through individuals in order to *construct individuals in accordance with that norm*. Power is now building something by building up particular sorts of someones, if you will. This is the remarkable shift Foucault saw in the shape that power took within the multiplicity of relations in which it found itself active.

Now that we have a sense of what Foucault meant by power—a small sense, but a sense nonetheless—I want to link this notion of power to religion. In a way, I have done that in my title by speaking of power as in some way *liturgical*. Why say that power such as Foucault’s has defined it as “liturgies?” Well, from a theological perspective, one might argue that the everydayness of our lives is characterized by liturgies, secular or sacred. We are “liturgical animals” as one theologian has said, and the various liturgies in which we involve ourselves—the ordinary ways in which we worship such realities, you might even say—fundamentally shape us as subjects (Smith 2009, p. 34). So if, as Foucault argues, “power is everywhere,” then we might expect it to take on a liturgical form (Foucault 1978, p. 95). I believe one could argue this, but for the sake of not alienating those who do not put much stock in the broader sacramentality of the cosmos, I think there are reasons from within Foucault’s own work to think of power as taking on, or even needing a liturgical form. In fact, the notion of liturgy as an embodied procedure meant to evoke, provoke, or reveal the *truth* is a vital through-line of Foucault’s lectures. The purpose of the section that follows will be to lay out the liturgical nature of disciplinary normalization and the religious nature of its roots in what Foucault called the “Christian pastorate.”

### 3. Power and Its “Liturgies”: The Christian Pastorate

Michael Jordan is well known to have had his “flu game,”—a 38-point performance in Game 5 of the 1997 NBA Finals whilst ridden with intense flu-like symptoms—but it is not as well known that Foucault had what one could call a “flu lecture.” For while beset by the flu, Foucault gave one of his most influential lectures on “governmentality” in February of 1978 at the Collège de France. After he had recovered from the illness, he devoted several lectures—collected within *Security, Territory, Population*—a two-day lecture series at Stanford entitled “*Omnes et Singulatim*,” and another series of lectures at the Collège de France entitled *On the Government of the Living*—to the theme of the “Christian pastorate.” I want to examine this theme of the Christian pastorate or pastoral, not simply to put even more exposition of Foucault on the table, but rather to show how it is that the particular shift in power Foucault has been describing above takes on a fundamentally religious character. This will inform deeply my contention that the primary way sport and religion share a fundamental resemblance is in operative modes of power rather than spiritual practices.

If the broad movement from the Middle Ages to the nascent stages of modernity is the movement away from a form of exclusive power and towards a more inclusive (and thereby disciplinary and normalizing) power, then we might perhaps think of the Christian pastorate as the catalyst for that shift. For, strikingly, Foucault avers of the Christian pastorate that it is “the birth of an absolutely new form of power” (Foucault 2009, p. 183). How could that be? I think Foucault’s answer is that the Christian pastorate solved a very particular problem, namely, how is it that power can function on the whole and the singular at the same time? This is why Foucault’s lectures at Stanford are entitled “*Omnes et Singulatim*,” *all* and *each*—meaning that the sort of innovation Foucault is going to speak about is a manner of exercising power on the one and the many simultaneously.

The term “pastoral” should evoke within the reader images of itinerant shepherds, and for Foucault, that is precisely intentional. The paradigm of the sort of power that Foucault is trying to get at in the pastoral mode of power is exemplified by the shepherd. Foucault is fascinated by this paradigm to the extent that he claims this combination of a generalized power with a centralizing or individualizing tendency is the very birthplace of the modern state. Yet, what does this sort of pastoral power look like? Taking the shepherd as an example, Foucault describes it thus: “The shepherd’s

power is exercised not over a territory but, by definition, over a flock, and more exactly, over the flock in its movement from one place to another. The shepherd's power is essentially exercised over a multiplicity in movement" (Foucault 2009, p. 125). Not only is such power defined by its itinerancy, it is also characteristically *beneficent*. "Pastoral power is the power of care. It looks after the flock, it looks after the individuals of the flock, it sees to it that the sheep do not suffer, it goes in search of those that have strayed off course, and it treats those that are injured" (Foucault 2009, p. 127). Lastly, this power is not shown forth in dazzlingly displays of strength and sovereignty, but rather shows itself in an endless sort of keeping. "The shepherd's power manifests itself, therefore, in a duty, a task to be undertaken . . . The shepherd keeps watch. He 'keeps watch' in the sense of course of keeping an eye out for possible evils, but above all in the sense of vigilance with regard to any possible misfortune" (Foucault 2009, p. 127). Of the utmost importance here is that this task of keeping watch is quite literally a zero-sum game. In other words, the watch of the shepherd must *individualize* each member of the flock as singled out for care because the shepherd's success depends upon not losing a single individual sheep. As Foucault puts it:

The shepherd counts the sheep; he counts them in the morning when he leads them to pasture, and he counts them in the evening to see that they are all there, and he looks after each of them individually. He does everything for the totality of his flock, but he does everything also for the sheep of the flock. And it is here that we come to the famous paradox of the shepherd, which takes two forms. On the one hand, the shepherd must keep his eye on all and on each, *omnes et singulatim*, which will be the great problem both of the techniques of power in Christian pastoralship and of the, let's say, modern techniques of power deployed in the technologies of population I have spoken about. (Foucault 2009, p. 128)

Pastoral power is, then, the sort of constant contact of power with each singular individual, and, through that constant vigilance upon each individual, power imposes itself upon the entirety of the population.

If one had any doubt on the religious nature of this power, Foucault himself makes the link explicit:

The powers held by the Church are given, I mean both organized and justified, as the shepherd's power in relation to the flock. What is sacramental power? Of baptism? It is calling the sheep into the flock. Of communion? It is giving spiritual nourishment. Penance is the power of reintegrating those sheep that have left the flock. A power of jurisdiction, it is also a power of the pastor, of the shepherd. It is this power of jurisdiction, in fact, that allows the bishop as pastor, for example, to expel from the flock those sheep that by disease or scandal are liable to contaminate the whole flock. Religious power, therefore, is pastoral power. (Foucault 2009, p. 153)

Finally, one curious feature that Foucault insists on, which is quite apropos to our current moment in sports, is that pastoral power remained "distinct from political power." Indeed, this was pastoral power's "absolutely fundamental and essential feature" throughout Christianity. Now, there are, of course, several historical objections to this assertion. Foucault admits that there were, in fact, "a series of conjunctions" in which the "intertwining of pastoral and political power" became a "historical reality" in the West (Foucault 2009). However, Foucault still asserts that despite these rare conjunctions, at least prior to the eighteenth century, pastoral power simply worked differently in its "form, type of functioning, and internal technology" than political power (Foucault 2009, p. 154).

What, then, are pastoral power's main concerns? What is this utterly unique mode of power attempting to accomplish? The main goal seems to be, so Foucault says, *salvation*, although this is not the singular essence of this power. The innovation of the Christian pastorate is to take particular religious categories—salvation, law, truth—and develop a particular series of techniques by which those might be realized in the subject. Let me clarify: The pastor's aim is to lead their sheep to the quiet waters, to save them, ultimately, from the perils and trials of the wilderness. I have already

noted above that the shepherd is in a uniquely accountable position with regards to the fate of his sheep. The pastor is judged based upon what Foucault called the “principle of analytic responsibility,” meaning that the fate of *every single sheep*, not just the majority, rests upon the pastor’s head. This jeopardy placed upon the pastor’s soul subsequently necessitates a very distinct relationship to *truth* and this, I think, is one of the key aspects of this religious mode of power. In order to prevent a failure within the flock, the pastor is responsible to *analyze* not just the numbers of the sheep but something far more onerous. “[The pastor] will have to account for every act of each of his sheep, for everything that may have happened between them, and everything good and evil they may have done at any time” (Foucault 2009, p. 170). Not only that, but the pastor shall also bear guilt on account of each failing of the sheep. “He must take delight in the good of the sheep with a particular and a personal joy, and grieve or repent of the evil due to his sheep” (Foucault 2009, p. 170). Spurred on by his pastoral task, an innovative economy of fault and merit develops. Since salvation requires not just the presence of truth within the one who submits to the guidance of the pastor but also requires the *public display* through some form of outward expression of this very truth, a series of exchanges and other ritual practices come to *produce* the confession of fault and the rewarding of merit. Pastoral power, then, constructs what Foucault called “regimes of truth,” that is, social institutions concerned with drawing out, analyzing, and ritualizing the outward expression of the hidden truth of the subject, their secret faults and their humble merits. As a result, the Christian pastorate is and must be *liturgical*. For its great innovation is not in centralizing salvation or merit or fault, but in the *mode of power* or the series of techniques by which it is causing the subject to produce obedience. Allow me one final quote from Foucault here:

So, the Christian pastorate is not fundamentally or essentially characterized by the relationship to salvation, to the law, or to the truth. The Christian pastorate is rather, a form of power that, taking the problem of salvation in its general set of themes, inserts into this circulation, transfer, and reversal of merits and this is its fundamental point. Similarly, with regard to the law, Christianity, the Christian pastorate, is not simply the instrument of the acceptance or generalization of the law, but rather, through an oblique relationship to the law as it were, it establishes a kind of exhaustive, total, and permanent relationship of individual obedience. . . . And finally, if Christianity, the Christian pastor, teaches the truth, if he forces men, the sheep, to accept a certain truth, the Christian pastorate is also absolutely innovative in establishing a structure, a technique of, at once, power, investigation, self-examination, and the examination of others, by which a certain secret inner truth of the hidden soul, becomes the element through which the pastor’s power is exercised, by which obedience is practiced, by which the relationship of complete obedience is assured, and through which, precisely, the economy of merits and faults passes. (Foucault 2009, p. 183)

In short, the unique thing about the Christian pastorate was not its particular doctrinal themes, but instead, the *form* that it took, its scope, and the end towards which it oriented itself—the production of obedience through outward displays of the truth. Let me turn now to the ways in which precisely this sort of religious power has shaped college football.

#### 4. The History of the Present of College Football

I realize that I have spoken very little of football thus far, and I have perhaps tested the reader’s patience in this regard. So, let me get to the point. Foucault famously ended the opening section of *Discipline and Punish* with the following passage:

I would like to write the history of this prison, with all the political investments of the body that it gathers together in its closed architecture. Why? Simply because I am interested in the past? No, if one means by that writing a history of the past in terms of the present. Yes, if one means writing the history of the

present. (Foucault 1977, p. 31)

What would it mean to tell the “history of the present” of college football, particularly in light of the explication of a Foucauldian notion of power we have just traversed?

I want to focus my attention on three aspects of college football that, I think, demonstrate its deep connection to Foucault’s account of power and the Christian pastorate I have just elaborated. There is here, no transition, as in Foucault’s genealogy of power, from a premodern form of exclusionary power to a modern form of inclusionary power. There was no premodern form of collegiate athletics that might be put forward as a time innocent of disciplinary normalization. Instead, we begin searching for the Christian pastorate within an institution that bills itself as secular, and my contention is that we find this religious mode of power present in the first moments of college football’s existence. Ultimately, college football provokes the religious question by showing forth religious modes of power in its seemingly innocuous and irreligious facets.

Hence, I first want to elucidate what I think is the “norm” of the normalizing power at the root of the entire enterprise of college football, which means analyzing some of the earliest discourses about what football was *for* in the broadest sense. What, in other words, did people think football was trying to make out of the young men that played it? Second, I want to examine contemporary practices of *disciplinary power* within the modern game of college football—practices that I see as the mechanisms of power’s imposition onto the bodies of college athletes. I want to highlight three practices, though there are plenty more, that are particularly apropos: the nutritional regimen of athletes, the unnecessary celebration rule, and the mandatory statements of non-compliance. Finally, I want to bring in our analysis on the Christian pastorate and show the ways that the role of coaches and athletes mirror the elements of the Christian pastorate, particularly its concern with liturgies that produce the truth of the subject. So, as before, we will move to the most general elements of power to the specific norm those practices are aimed at producing, and finally, to the pastoral nature of the work of that very production.

First, to college football’s first storytellers. College football began as an odd amalgam of what we now know as soccer and rugby. Depending on the two schools that were competing, the game might look more like soccer than rugby and vice versa. The original competitors within the sport often favored rule changes that brought the sport more in line with the style of play they were best at—hence, why some figures often resisted reforms to remove “mass formation” play from the game on account of its brutality. What concerns me in the earliest moments of football, however, is less the rule reforms that turned the game into the oddly American spectacle we now enjoy and more so, the *story* that people came to tell about college football—the story, in other words, that college football and those who watched it came to tell about it. Crises brought on by the brutality of the game, forced upon the earliest proponents of college football the question: *What is football for?* My contention is that, wrapped within that answer, we find evidence of a norm towards normalizing power whose positive aim was to produce normalized bodies through disciplinary mechanisms.

Collegiate athletics bears a telling historical semblance with the roots of Christian monasticism. At its earliest point, sporting contests taking place on college campuses were often an instance of spirited rebellion against a paternalistic and hierarchical institution. The first games were student-led attempts to establish some form of leisure that was a clear break from the rules of the *collegium* to which they were subject as students (Smith 1988, p. 22). This meant that most college sports began as something that could not have been thought of as less meaningful to the broader culture. They were, seemingly, communal activities, but ones that had no intention of being public-facing, so to speak. This was not to last, obviously, as the surrounding communities latched on to these leisurely pursuits as an entertaining spectacle and a means of showing pride in a communal identity. With this increase in popularity, the home institutions gradually reclaimed control of these athletic pursuits from the students and did so as an attempt to rein in their excesses and bring them to heel under a more stable form of governance (Smith 1988, pp. 191–208).

Early monasticism, Foucault notes, had a similar historical trajectory. The foundation of the earliest monasteries were not on account of the desire to retreat from a sinful world and a Church prone

to excess and syncretism. Instead, the need for a Rule was to combat an “untrammelled intensification of ascetic practices current at the end of the third and start of the fourth century.” In other words, the problem was not that there was not sufficient asceticism within the Church—the forms that were there were out of control and prone to extravagance. Foucault describes it thusly: “A wild intensification taking the form of an individual asceticism with no rule, of a geographical vagrancy, but also an uncontrolled speculative vagrancy and wandering accompanied by a blossoming of exploits, visions, extraordinary ascesis, miracles, and rivalries and jousts in ascetic rigor as well as in thaumaturgic marvels.” This multifarious field of ascetic practices had to be “taken in hand, regularized, and brought back into the ecclesiastical institution in general and the dogmatic system that was being constructed at this time through successive expurgations of heresies” (Foucault 2016, p. 292).

Camp’s earliest writings bear out this seemingly counter-intuitive concern. As Michael Oriard tells it, “The most pressing initial need, according to Camp, was simply for order” (Oriard 1993, p. 41). Yet, the *kind* of order that Camp envisioned was not value neutral. Indeed, for Camp, the goal of the sport soon became to stake out its difference between what he saw as the chaotic and disordered play of European rugby. So the progress to order through meticulous and even “technocratic” management was also the path to “perfection of play” and a sense of uniquely “American achievement.” It should come as no surprise, then, that Camp’s ideal for order was “the rationalized, bureaucratic, specialized corporate work force,” complete with a hierarchical structure, organized by skill and executive ability (Oriard 1993, p. 41). Consider this passage from one of his later essays:

But where did the coach come from and why did he come? He was developed by the exigencies of the case, and he came because team play began to take the place of ineffective individual effort. The American loves to plan. It is that trait that has been at the base of his talents for organization. As soon as the American took up Rugby foot-ball he was dissatisfied because the ball would pop out of the scrimmage at random. It was too much luck and chance as to where or when it came out, and what man favored by Dame Fortune would get it. So he developed a scrimmage of his own, a center-rusher, or snap-back, a quarter-back, and soon a system of signals. One could no more prevent the American college youth from thus advancing than he could stop their elders with their more important and gigantic enterprises. But all these things led to team play, at the sacrifice, perhaps, of individual brilliancy, but with far greater effectiveness of the eleven men in what for them was the principal affair of the moment—the securing of goals and touch-downs. (Camp 1910, pp. 333–34)

Such was one key part of the original ideal to which football as an enterprise was oriented—the creation of a sense of order through structured hierarchy, centered around a managerial elite in control of a compliant group of subordinates. Football acted as a shaping of bodies through disciplinary practices to fill these roles.

Yet, this disdain for “individual brilliance” on Camp’s part could not hold as the *modus operandi* for the game that Camp created. In an ironic twist of fate, the highly ordered game that Camp so revered was too boring for any spectator to enjoy. Desire for the chance to see individual achievement in more of an “open play” format soon came to change the game in significant ways. While one might be tempted to think that this resistance to a form of play that was more managerial and technocratic in form would amount to a resistance to normalization, the opposite has turned out to be the case. The turn to an open game in search of individual genius only strengthened the pull towards an imagined norm and the disciplinary practices that one could use to construct that norm.

Once the transition to an open game was complete, the norm of collegiate athletics became a complex amalgam of at least three types. First, was the technocratic ideal of a disciplined teammate, preparing to contribute to the American workforce. Second, was the virtuous amateur, who eschewed the compensation of professionalism and played the game according to a gentleman’s code. Finally, and perhaps present in both of the prior types, was a vision of the amateur athlete as the paragon of *manliness*. Athletes that played college football were held to the standards of *all* of these types

simultaneously, as practices of disciplinary normalization sought to produce truth-acts in keeping with each type, despite their contradictions.

The two mechanisms that attempted to produce these sorts of ideals within the bodies of college footballers were the physical regimens set forth by their now professional coaches—most of whom were from the coaching tree of Walter Camp, though not all—and the narrative of the daily presses, who shaped the cultural narrative around college football for the majority of the literate country. Briefly, there are examples in the daily presses of each type. Consider this entry from the *New York Herald* on the efforts of Frank Butterworth in Yale's victory over Harvard in 1893:

This man attempted no play independent of his team. He did not seek the applause of the galleries nor did he try to distinguish himself by individual efforts of a spectacular nature. He simply gave himself up to his part in the machine of which he was the wheel, but in performing this part he won the game. He was as the driving wheel to a great engine. (as quoted in Oriard 1993, p. 178)

As to the second type, the virtuous amateur, the case of Caspar Whitney's writings in *Outing* are of particular note. In his 1893 column "Amateur Sport," we find the following complaint about a controversy over eligibility requirements: "It is shameful that all this political claptrap and legislation should be tolerated. We had rather see football forbidden by the university faculties than pained by the exhibition of our college boys, *sons of gentlemen*, resorting to the intrigues of unprincipled professionals" (Oriard 1993, p. 154). I emphasize the phrase "sons of gentlemen" because for Whitney, this was meant quite literally. The purpose of amateur sport was to instantiate the values of the ruling class and as such, for Whitney, "There are no degrees of amateurism." Hence, despite his admirations for Camp's technocratic approach to football, Whitney polemicized the rise of professionalism in amateur sport and often predicted the imminent demise of amateur sports, should not dramatic reforms be undertaken. Whitney thus argued for an embrace of football as play in keeping with the emphasis in traditional amateurism on disinterestedness with regards to the outcome of the game or any rewards brought on by winning. Such compensation was, according to Whitney, "as disgraceful to the honor of gentlemen as it is destructive to the health—even the life—of amateur sport" (Oriard 1993, p. 158). Finally, almost as an aside, we also see, in Whitney, one of the first advocates for a type of pastoral position for the head coach. Despite his deep enmity towards the idea of paid coaches, Whitney did, at one point, ask the following: "Why does not Yale make Walter Camp alone responsible for the ethics of its teams?" (Oriard 1993, p. 156). Within the ideal of the amateur, then, there is already emerging, at the very same time, the ideal of the coach as shepherd of the flock, as the one who is morally responsible for the purity of each individual under their charge.

Finally, the third type—manliness—is extensively opined upon within the daily presses in the earliest days of college football. There was no adjective so often associated with the purpose of football as was "manly," and if there is a provisional answer for the question, "What is football for?" it would surely be to inculcate manliness. As a graduate of the University of Georgia, I find one particular example to be of particular note here—that is, the death of Richard Von Gammon and his mother's subsequent appeal to the Governor of Georgia to veto a bill that would have banned the playing of football in the state of Georgia. Von Gammon was killed in a game versus the University of Virginia on Halloween, 1897. The Georgia Legislature immediately passed a bill banning the play of football in the state of Georgia, but before the Governor could sign the bill, he received a letter from Von Gammon's mother that contained the following line: "His love for his college and his interest in all manly sports, without which he deemed the highest type of manhood impossible, is well known by his classmates and friends, and it would be inexpressibly sad to have the cause he held so dear injured by his sacrifice" (Pirani 2015). The daily presses filled out this vision of manhood in the coming years. Football's brutality was acknowledged but such roughness was good because "Christian manliness demands stern virtues" (Oriard 1993, p. 207). Indeed, it is important to point out here that while the

daily presses were rarely explicitly racist, the manliness in question and meant to be proved on the gridiron was always the manliness of white Europeans. Ultimately, football as a testing ground for true manliness became one of the principle cultural meanings of football and such a fusion between corporate submission, disinterested amateurism, and Christian manliness has remained a predominant feature of the game up to its current form.

I wish now to leap far ahead over so many significant moments in the history of college football. I do so in order to turn briefly to contemporary college football and the disciplinary practices inherent to the game as we know it today. Student-athletes at “big-time” institutions often live in a paradoxical position with regards to surveillance. Student-athletes are highly surveilled and analyzed during required athletic practices but not always so highly surveilled with regards to their class attendance. That is, they are not so highly surveilled until their grades dip near a mark that would jeopardize their academic eligibility requirements, in which case, the surveillance ramps up considerably. Hence, while the levels are not always consistent, I think the point of surveillance of student-athletes strikes me as inculcating and maintains a form of health or truth. This means that it is also a surveillance geared towards staving off the sort of “degeneracy” and “abnormality” through processes of disciplinary normalization. The degeneracy to be avoided is both a physical and a spiritual degeneracy. Thus, surveillance of student-athletes focuses on physical practices on the one hand—their workout routines, nutritional regimen, and biometric data recorded during practices—while, on the other hand, such surveillance is also geared towards displays of virtue—class attendance, volunteer activities, and participation in non-mandatory religious service.

What comes to be produced by these contemporary disciplinary practices is an amalgam of the initial conflict between ideals in the nascent stages of college football—the technocratic and the heroic. The college athlete is both the honer of a “craft” preparing for the abrogation of individual will in their role as worker as well as the virtuous amateur who seeks not a salary but the game for the game’s sake. The athlete is not just an athlete but a student-athlete, an amateur seeking an education and the exercise of virtue, first and foremost, and only after that, a mode of compensation based on his individual athletic prowess. The main point, however, is that these positive results are produced by *public displays of truth*. This is why the actions of student-athletes provoke such fervent controversy in the world of “sports-talk” because what is at stake in the public actions of amateur athletes is the success of the system as a whole. The public action of amateur athletes is meant as a test, an ordeal meant to show forth the results of this complicated liturgy of normalization. On the field and in the press conference, athletes are being asked to show forth the truth of themselves, to display the truth of their virtue through a public act of truth-telling, and if such truth-telling fails or is eschewed, then some form of conflict is sure to follow.

This desire for truth-acts also makes sense of the N.C.A.A.’s expectation that the athletic institutions themselves issue what are called voluntary declarations of noncompliance. In essence, the N.C.A.A. expects that athletic departments will self-report violations of N.C.A.A. rules to the N.C.A.A., with no guarantee that such self-disclosure will result in a more lenient punishment. Perhaps it is too obvious, but this strikes me as a clear example of a public-facing truth-act aimed at rooting out “abnormality” within institutions who are committed to instantiating states of normalcy. One odd example is from the University of Oklahoma in 2013. In their self-report of violations to the N.C.A.A., many sportswriters noticed an odd entry for what was termed “pasta in excess of the permissible amount allowed” (Aber 2014). Apparently, at a graduation banquet, three student athletes were served pasta beyond the “permissible amount allowed” and were required, in order to be reinstated to their respective teams, to donate the value of the excessive servings—a whopping \$3.83—to a charity of their choice. Students were then given further training on the precise nature of the N.C.A.A. rules with regards to pasta consumption and sent along their way. While the idea that \$3.83 worth of pasta as a pernicious moral incursion from the vile ideology of professionalism is patently ridiculous, the impulse behind the need to resolve this violation can now be explained. The point is not the following of the rules but producing the sorts of people who *tell the truth about the rules*. The point is not the resolution of the

violation but the reporting of the violation as a truth-act towards the N.C.A.A. The wandering astray of just one single sheep—or in this case, three sheep wondering towards a tower of linguine—jeopardizes the salvation of the shepherd. Thus, even for something as odd and, frankly, petty as pasta in excess of the permissible amount, disciplinary normalization requires that the truth be set forth in a visible way.

One essential contention of Foucault's that I must note here is the idea that normalizing power is inherently racialized. Normalizing power breeds what Foucault called the "racism against the abnormal" (Foucault 2003b, p. 316). The final thing to argue with regards to contemporary practices of normalization in college football is that such normalization is also racialized. The ideal that the positive technologies of power at work in amateur athletics are attempting to produce is based on whiteness. The most prominent example of this racialization of the norm, I would argue, is the "excessive celebration" penalty. The excessive celebration penalty is not an attempt to stop a certain kind of behavior, but to inculcate and produce behaviors more in keeping with the norm—where the abnormal is here associated with blackness and the norm associated with whiteness. That disposition, at least it seems to me, is that of the disinterested amateur who needs not celebrate individual athletic accomplishment but instead either directs all praise to his teammates or shows his class by treating an instance of individual achievement as nothing all that special. The celebration penalty is meant to produce players that, as the colloquialism goes, "act like they've been there before."

Here, again, however, the rule is aimed at staving off a sort of abnormality or degeneracy—in this case, the vice of pride or unsportsmanlike conduct. Yet, normalizing power reveals that its vision of abnormality is racialized by policing the celebration of black athletes as fundamentally more "arrogant" or "unsportsmanlike" than the celebrations of white athletes. In fact, in a recent study it was shown that this is not a bug of the language of the rule but is rather a feature of even ordinary fans. A group of seventy-four M.B.A. students were given scenarios to read in which black athletes and white athletes were said to have scored and then either celebrated or did not. Participants were then asked questions regarding compensation, i.e., whether the player who scored should receive a bonus for the play, and questions regarding arrogance, i.e., whether the celebration after the touchdown was evidence of the player's arrogance or not. Researchers found the following: "Study 1 demonstrated that Black football players who behaved in an arrogant manner were punished more than Black football players who behaved in a humbler manner. However, there was no difference in penalty between arrogant and humble White players. Furthermore, the magnitude of penalty against Black players was significantly correlated with the degree to which they were perceived as arrogant" (Hall and Livingston 2012, p. 901). Our perceived conception of humility, in other words, is already skewed towards whiteness, and our preconceived notion of blackness is already skewed towards arrogance. So while a pursuit of instantiating the norm of humility might be a worthwhile goal, our preconceived notion of the ideal of humility will always be prone to visions of whiteness.

The difficulty, therefore, is finding another way of imagining the governance of amateur athletics, a way of governance perhaps beyond the norm of the amateur. What could this vision of a new present for college football look like and what could religion have to contribute to such a conversation? Let me, in conclusion, turn briefly to these questions.

## 5. Conclusions: The Art of Voluntary Inservitude

There is a powerful sort of pessimism often associated with Foucault's analysis of power. If power is everywhere, one might argue, then there is no escape from processes of disciplinary normalization. If, as I mentioned above, resistance never occupies a place exterior to power, then, what is the point of resistance? We find ourselves perhaps remarking, as the Frankfurt School once did, that "Every spiritual resistance it encounters serves merely to increase its strength" (Horkheimer and Adorno 1982, p. 6). Or, we might take up more of a Marxist perspective and look to that system of thought to provide more of a practical solution to power's reach within collegiate athletics. I am not, I must ironically confess, an expert on Marx. His work has produced several excellent articles on collegiate athletics

from Nathan Kalman-Lamb, but beyond directing the reader toward Kalman-Lamb's work, I can offer little more in that direction (Kalman-Lamb 2019, 2020).

Yet, perhaps there is more to Foucault's project than a doom-and-gloom resignation to the inevitability of power's grip on us. Indeed, in a recent essay on Foucault and freedom, Saul Newman notes that freedom is actually a principle occupation of Foucault's, and not merely out of a sense of cynicism. Foucault's broader project seems to be building towards finding a place for freedom within and against the seemingly omnipotent confines of power. Even more importantly, however, Newman argues that for Foucault, freedom is the original first principle. It is not, in other words, that we need to accomplish some great revolutionary victory in order to emancipate ourselves from power. Instead, it is the first fact about us, as human beings, that we are free. We seem habitually to surrender that freedom to power, and so the preoccupation of Newman is to highlight just how it would be that we might practice the "art of voluntary inservitude." Just as Foucault wished to practice the "art of the self," how might we come to practice the art of inservitude to the governing mechanisms that push us towards a predetermined norm? In football terms, how might we come to imagine a mode of governance of college athletes that is free, to as large an extent as possible, from the processes of normalization?

First, Newman notes that for Foucault, *critique* is the beginning of this sort of involuntary servitude. He notes this passage from an essay on Kant:

If governmentalization is really this movement concerned with subjugating individuals in the very reality of social practice, by mechanisms of power that appeal to a truth, I will say that critique is the movement through which the subject gives itself the right to question truth concerning its power effects and to question power about its discourses of truth. Critique will be the art of voluntary inservitude, of reflective indocility. (Foucault 1996, p. 386)

Hence, while it might sound a bit self-serving, one of the first ways of imagining new means of governance is continuing to tell the story of the contingencies of amateurism. The point is to show through genealogy that the forms of governance that are active in our current moment have only earned their authority through a sedimentary accumulation of a faux timelessness. Yet, once their histories are told, and the contingencies of history that led to their coming into power are laid bare, the possibility of indocility to their social effects becomes a real possibility. Religious scholars, I want to say, are in a particularly good position to make just this critique, since they can expose not only the political machinations or cultural dynamics that make amateurism possible but also the *religious conditions of amateurism's possibility*. This is, I think, one key task that lays before scholars interested in the religion-sport connection.

The practical implications of Newman's argument, however, are quite vast. Newman argues that the above cited passage reveals the "ontological primacy of freedom" for Foucault. "Rather than power being the secret of freedom, as Foucault has so often been interpreted as saying, *freedom is the secret of power*" (Newman 2015, p. 63). This means that two "startling revelation(s)" are both true: first, that "every system of power/knowledge depends on our will, our acceptance," and that, consequently, "the reversal of this system is equally a matter of will, of decision, of free volition" (Newman 2015, p. 63). The way in which a new form of governance for amateur athletics emerges is that *we decide that it shall*; but, of course, simply stating this is quite easy. Actually, fostering such a decision is far more complex. I am not in a position to advocate for any particular decision in this regard, but I do think that one role scholars of religion and sport ought to take up, in the days to come, is one who teaches athletes the nature of the prior decision to submit. In so doing, we offer up the possibility that the re-imagining of amateur governance might come not from faculty, but from the athletes themselves. For regardless of what faculty might desire for good or ill with regard to collegiate athletics, the desire no longer to be governed in such a way, the desire to no longer be unreflectively docile, must come from the athletes themselves.

To conclude, the reader will note I have not considered any significant critiques of Foucault's project or of his specific arguments on religion. I leave the task of modifying this argument via engagement with such critiques to a scholar of greater merit (and with a greater remaining word count!) than I. Instead, I want to return to a summative moment from Walter Camp. In *Walter Camp's Book of College Sports* there is a curious and uncharacteristic account from Camp of the final plays of the Princeton-Yale game of 1885. Camp, as detailed above, the advocate always of *team* and *control*, devoted considerable space to praising a single moment of physical brilliance by an individual player. Yale led Princeton in the late stages of the game and had two options for securing their lead. They could either continue to run the ball, which would make it impossible for Princeton to score before time ran out, or they could kick the ball downfield in the hopes that Princeton would fumble the ensuing return, giving Yale the last score they needed to put the game away. Yale's captain, Peters, elected to kick. The kicked ball was "perfect" according to Camp and, sure enough, the Princeton man that attempted a catch had the ball bounce off of his chest—just the fumble Yale had wanted to cause. Yet, to everyone's surprise, a young Princetonian named Lamar rushed towards the bouncing ball and, by some stroke of luck, had the ball land in his hands off the bounce, right in his stride. The Yale team, having now over-pursued the kick, were dumbfounded to see Lamar slip past the rushers and up the field into open space. Lamar is then met by two Yale defenders who have the proper positioning to tackle Lamar and end the return, but Lamar, as Camp tells it, "made a swerve to the right, and was by them like lightning before either of them could recover" (Camp 1893, p. 146). The only man that can catch Lamar now is Peters, with only one hope to save the upset victory for Yale. Camp describes the drama of the final pursuit thus:

Then began the race for victory . . . Peters, a strong, untiring, thoroughly trained runner, was but a few yards behind [Lamar] and in addition to this he was the captain of a team which but a moment before had been sure of victory. How he ran! But Lamar—did he not too know full well what the beat of those footsteps behind him meant! The white five-yard lines flew under his feet; past the broad twenty-five yard line he goes, still with three or four yards to spare. Now he throws his head back with the familiar motion of the sprinter who is almost to the tape, and who will run his heart out in the last few strides, and, almost before one can breathe, he is over the white goal-line panting on the ground, with the ball under him, a touch-down made, from which a goal was kicked, and the day saved for Princeton. Poor Lamar! He was drowned a few years after graduation, but no name will be better remembered among the foot-ball players of that day than will his". (Camp 1893, p. 146)

Even Camp, as committed as he was to a model of college football molded to a sort of paternalistic control, could not escape the inbreaking of something within the very sport he helped create—the sheer vivacity of embodied life, the freedom song of the body in motion. If college football is structured around the creation of docile bodies, if such is its *modus operandi*, then we should also expect, as readers of Foucault, to see such inbreakings of the remainder, of freedom, of that voluntary inservitude that precedes power's impositions. This must be, for those of us who attempt to theorize college sports, the first truth of these sports, not the docility imposed by disciplinary normalization. To borrow a Nietzschean framework, there is Dionysian as well as Apollonian energy at the root of this game that so many love—both an energy of ordering and an energy of the undoing of any and all order.

I do not wish to leave you with the notion that it will take a removal of religion or religiosity from the mode of governance within collegiate athletics to make this sort of freedom more possible or frequent. I wonder, instead, if there is not something to the notion that both the disciplinary mechanisms meant to mold athletes towards the norm, and the ebullient burst of Dionysian, chaotic energy described above by Camp, are not *both* fundamentally religious. From a Christian perspective, it is perhaps a fundamental good to seek order, virtue, and humility through submission and mortification of sinful desire. However, now, Scripture tells us, is the time of the Spirit, and the Spirit blows where it wills. In short, the work of religious scholars interested in intervening in the sport/religion relationship, will mirror, in many ways, the use of Foucault's *oeuvre* for religious studies—that is, as a cataloguer

of the conditions for the possibility of our present within the religious modes of power that seek ever to present their formations or structures as eternal verities. Foucault's "care of the self," an art of self-making inherent in the vision of freedom I mentioned above, shows that religious askesis or self-discipline is not at all inimical to this form of freedom and, in fact, might require it. Thus, the role of religious scholars, particularly those of us who are Christians ourselves and have some "skin in the game," must be to tell the stories of, as I said earlier, the religious conditions that make amateurism possible. Beyond that, scholars, particularly *theologians*, also must point to ways in which the Christian vision of order and chaos, that odd mean between Calvary and Pentecost, offers to us an ecstatic vision of human freedom that is often incompatible with the mode of pastoral governance taken up by the N.C.A.A., its member athletic departments, and their head football coaches. The study of collegiate athletics would thereby benefit from a critique of its religious foundations, as well as a reimagining of its future form, from a religious perspective.

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