

## **Suggested Project:**

**If you are, or have been, associated with a religious congregation, comment on the extent to which it exemplifies the second paragraph below as well as any other aspect of Barber's essay.**

Published on *Psychology Today* (<http://www.psychologytoday.com>)

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# **Is Sport a Religion?**

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Created Nov 11 2009 - 6:41am

**Psychologists are closing in on the conclusion that sport has many of the same effects on spectators as religion does. Here is Daniel Wann [2001], a leading sport psychologist at Murray State University, and his co-authors:**

**"The similarities between sport fandom and organized religion are striking. Consider the vocabulary associated with both: faith, devotion, worship, ritual, dedication, sacrifice, commitment, spirit, prayer, suffering, festival, and celebration." p. 198**

**It may seem odd, to equate religion with sport entertainment but it must be understood that prior to mass communications, religious ceremonies were a source of entertainment for ordinary people who rarely attended a theater or traveled to a sporting event. Sports and religion may get categorized separately but their intersection is difficult to miss.**

**As Wann and collaborators note, various scholars discuss sport in terms of "natural religion," "humanistic religion," and "primitive polytheism" pointing out that "spectators worship other human beings, their achievements, and the groups to which they belong." And that sports stadia and arenas resemble "cathedrals where followers gather to worship their heroes and pray for their successes." [Wann, et al., 2001, p. 200]**

**If ritual may be entertaining, then entertainment, as experienced in a sports stadium, may be ritualistic. Fans wear the team colors and carry its flags, icons, and mascots. Then there is repetitive chanting of team encouragement, hand-clapping, booing the other team, doing the wave, and so forth. The singing of an anthem at a sporting event likely has similar psychological effects as the singing of a hymn in church.**

**Given that sports entertainment has obvious similarities to religious rituals, it is reasonable to ask whether the connection between fans and their preferred sport has psychological effects that are comparable to religious experiences - effects that account for religion as a worldwide human adaptation.**

### ***Sports as a substitute for religion***

**As a group, sports fans are fairly religious, according to research. It is also curious that as religious attendance rates have dropped off in recent decades, interest in sport spectatorship has soared. Moreover, research has debunked several stereotypes about sports fans that seem incompatible with religiosity. Fans are not lazy, Nor are they particularly prone to violence. Male fans do not have bad marriages.**

**Some scholars believe that fans are highly committed to their favored stars and teams in a way that gives focus and meaning to their daily lives. In addition, sports spectatorship is a transformative experience through which fans escape their humdrum lives, just as religious experiences help the faithful to transcend their everyday existence.**

**From that perspective, the face painting, hair tinting, and distinctive costumes are thought to satisfy specific religious goals including identification with the team, escape from everyday limitations and disappointments, and establishing a community of fans.**

**So far, the transformative aspects of fandom are quite close to those associated with religion. Lest the fans become too smug, here is a socialist critique:**

**Shaped by the needs of capitalist systems, spectator sports serve vested interests as a type of "cultural anesthesia," a form of "spiritual masturbation," or "opiate" that distracts, diverts, and deflects attention from the pressing social problems and issues of the day [Wann, pp 201-202].**

**Of course, Karl Marx famously declared that religion is the opium of the people, Not all religions numb people to their social and moral responsibilities, however. One thinks of liberation theology in Latin America, for instance. No one ever claimed that sports had such redeeming qualities, however. According to one critic (Harris, 1981), "it has turned into a passion, a mania, a drug far more potent and widespread than any mere chemical substance." It is the new opium of the people.**

Harris, S. J. (1981, November 3). Sport is new opium of the people. Democrat and Chronicle, p. 3B.  
Wann, D. L., Melznick, M. J., Russell, G. W., & Pease, D. G. (2001). Sport fans: The psychology and social impact of spectators .New York: Routledge.

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