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1 **“Don’t ever mix God with sports”: Christian religion in athletes’ stories of life transitions**

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6

7 **Abstract**

8 Sport psychology researchers have increasingly recognised the need to adopt a holistic
9 perspective when seeking to understand athletes’ adaptation to life transitions. The present study
10 sought to understand how religion influences athletes’ journeys in sport and experiences of life
11 transitions. Two Christian elite athletes participated in life story interviews which we analysed
12 via narrative analysis. Although the participants narratively separated religious belief from sport,
13 religion, as a source of basic world assumptions and values, provided a broader framework of
14 meaning and continuity in their sport lives. Yet, both stories involved a growing distance to
15 institutional religious practices and movement towards individualised religiosity as they
16 traversed cultural and developmental transitions. For applied practitioners, it is important to be
17 aware of the unique ways in which religion influences the sport life, and to recognise personal
18 and cultural attitudes that will shape their applied work with religious athletes.

19

20 Keywords: Christianity, career transition, life meaning, athletic identity, adaptation

21 **“Don’t ever mix God with sports”:** Christian religion in athletes’ stories of life transitions

22 Research into athletes’ developmental trajectories has diversified in recent years, and there
23 has been an emerging sensitivity to athletes’ broader frameworks of life meaning and how they
24 shape sporting experiences (Blodgett, Ge, Schinke, & McGannon, 2017; Ryba, Schinke,
25 Stambulova, & Elbe, 2017; Schinke et al., 2007). A number of researchers have acknowledged
26 the need to adopt “a whole person” perspective in order to understand how people respond and
27 adapt to transitions in sport life (Knowles & Lorimer, 2014; Stambulova, 2017). Although
28 religiosity has been argued to play a central role in individual career decision-making processes,
29 overall life course development (Richmond, 2016) and adaptation to life transitions (Pargament,
30 2001), it remains one of the less studied dimensions of athletes’ life-worlds and career
31 development trajectories. This paper contributes to filling this gap by studying the role of
32 religion, understood as the beliefs, practices, values and communities that are related to the
33 transcendent (Saroglou, 2011), in athletes’ life narratives and experiences of life transitions.

34 Although no studies have specifically focused on religion in relation to athletes’ career
35 development and transitions, a few studies in psychology and sociology of sport have provided
36 accounts of how religion and sport intersect. Most often, studies and applied reflections have
37 illustrated the powerful influence of religion on sporting experience. That is, religious athletes
38 may experience their sporting talent as a gift from God (Balague, 1999; Mosley, Frierson, Cheng,
39 & Aoyagi, 2015) and interpret their daily experiences in sport through their religious framework
40 of life meaning (Blodgett et al., 2017; Mosley et al., 2015; Nesti, 2011). Furthermore, a body of
41 literature has explored religious practices such as prayer and their role in athletes’ mental
42 preparation to competitions (Czech & Bullet, 2007; Czech, Wrisberg, Fisher, Thompson, &
43 Hayes, 2004; Schinke et al., 2007; Vernacchia, McGuire, Reardon, & Templin, 2000). Religion

44 has been moreover reported to be an important source of meaning for some athletes when facing
45 critical moments such as injury or poor performance (Grindstaff, Wrisberg, & Ross, 2010; Nesti,
46 2011; Vernacchia et al., 2000).

47 Stevenson's (1991) sociological study also identified three different ways in which Christian
48 athletes in Canada negotiated their religious and sporting identities. The first type he identified
49 was *the segregated type*, referring to athletes who almost entirely separated these two life
50 contexts and identities. These athletes only expressed their Christianity in a religious community
51 and explained that sport had its own ethics that need not be congruent with Christian values.
52 Some talked about how they "leave God on the sidelines" (p. 366) and did not see a problem in
53 hurting an opponent. The second, and dominant type was *the selective type* where athletes could
54 express their religious identity in some sporting situations, but the athletic identity and sport-
55 specific ethics mostly took precedence in a sport context. For example, one athlete explained that
56 in order to survive in sport, "you've got to be downright mean sometimes" (p. 367); however,
57 most often athletes maintained that the sport practices should be within the rules of the game, felt
58 that religion helped them to cope with winning and losing, and some talked about "winning for
59 God" and "giving glory to God" (p. 368). Finally, a few athletes were identified as *the committed*
60 *type* for whom the Christian identity was considered to have the primacy in all contexts of life.
61 These athletes talked about always being accountable to God and the overriding importance of
62 religion over sport. However, some athletes admitted sometimes compromising their Christian
63 identity to be accepted in the team, and some of them had ultimately decided to retire from sport
64 to resolve the dissonance between these two identities.

65 Whilst research in sport psychology has often considered religion as a unified construct, or
66 focused on one aspect of religion only (e.g., prayer), scholarship in psychology of religion has

67 sought to distinguish different dimensions of religion to gain a more nuanced understanding of
68 how religion manifests in individual lives (Glock, 1962; Saroglou, 2011). Saroglou (2011)
69 suggested to that religion could be analytically divided into four distinct, yet inter-related
70 components: (1) *believing* (in some form of transcendence, basic world assumptions, and
71 meaningfulness of life); (2) *bonding* (with a deeper reality, others and/or the ‘inner’ self, often
72 through religious rituals such as prayer, meditation or worship); (3) *behaving* (in line with
73 specific norms and moral standards derived from religion); and (4) *belonging* (in a community of
74 believers that is shaped by tradition and imagined glorious future). These dimensions were
75 suggested to represent the cognitive, emotional, moral, and social elements of religion,
76 respectively. Yet there could be large cultural variance on the salience of different dimensions of
77 religiosity. For example, liberal European Protestantism has typically emphasised individual
78 belief, whereas morality has been a dominant dimension in conservative Protestantism in the
79 U.S. (Saroglou, 2011). Catholicism, on the other hand, has been described as a practice-based
80 religion in Canada where one of our participants had grown up (Beaman, 2012). At the same
81 time, especially for transnational migrants, the religious experience is often shaped by global
82 circulation of religious ideas and practices rather than the family tradition or country of origin
83 alone (Levitt, Lucken, & Barnett, 2011).

84 To sum up, even though religion is increasingly recognised as a central dimension of life
85 meaning for many athletes (Balague, 1999; Nesti, 2011; Sarkar, Hill, Parker, 2015), no studies in
86 sport psychology have explored religion’s role in shaping athletes’ life trajectories in sport and
87 experiences of life transitions. Building upon Stevenson’s (1991) typology of how Christian
88 athletes negotiate their religious and sporting identities, as well as the multidimensional
89 framework of religion (Saroglou, 2011), the present study seeks to expand understandings of

90 how Christian religion shapes athletes' journeys in sport. The following research questions
91 guided our inquiry: How do Christian athletes understand the relationship between religion (as
92 believing, behaving, bonding, and belonging) and sport? How can their stories be understood in
93 relation to Stevenson's (1991) three types of identity negotiation (segregated, selective, and
94 committed)? How do the various dimensions of religion shift within athletes' developmental
95 journeys and life transitions?

96 **Methodology**

97 Our analytic work is based on an existential psychological view on narrative theory, where
98 the search for meaning is understood as a basic condition of human existence (Richert, 2010).
99 Although meaning is *lived* – that is, it is found in our concrete actions and engagement in the
100 world – it is at the same time generated in reflection and language. In other words, our story-
101 telling activity locates us in a particular socio-cultural setting which provides us with a horizon
102 of understanding (Richert, 2010). This implies that meanings are enabled or constrained by our
103 embodied capabilities and limitations, but also culturally constituted in that our storytelling is
104 shaped by cultural narrative resources that are accessible to us (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). The
105 (sub)cultural narrative resources guide us in constructing explanations that 'make sense' and help
106 us in selecting events and experiences that 'should' be included in telling a life story to a
107 particular audience (McAdams, 2008).

108 The life story approach (Atkinson, 2002) takes seriously the storied nature of human life and
109 allows for understanding how individuals negotiate change and continuity in their sense of self
110 and life unfolding. The need to understand athletes' transition experiences in the broader context
111 of their lives has been highlighted by a number of scholars, both in terms of their personal
112 biographies as well as their socio-cultural locations (e.g., Stambulova, 2017). Carless and

113 Douglas (2009) argued that “the ways career transition affects an individual is best understood in
114 light of earlier events in her or his life, the personal meaning of sport, and the potential impact of
115 co-occurring transitions” (p. 52), whilst also warning that the dominant ‘performance narrative’
116 of elite sport could have serious implications for athletes’ mental health as it directed athletes to
117 develop a narrow sense of self-worth contingent on athletic success. Since the life story
118 perspective “enables us to see and identify threads and links that connect one part of a person's
119 life to another” (Atkinson, 2002, p.126), it is a particularly useful approach for understanding
120 how people respond to life transitions and what sustains or threatens adaptation and well-being.
121 For this study, the particular focus was on religion and its implications for experiences of life
122 transitions in athletes’ developmental trajectories.

123 *Participants*

124 The participants of the study were selected from broader life story research that the first
125 and the second author conducted on athletes’ career experiences in the Nordic region. Our
126 research involved a total of 25 athletes of various nationalities who had practised their sport in
127 the Nordic countries. The study aimed to gain a holistic understanding of these athletes and their
128 life concerns, including religion and spirituality (if these were relevant identities for the
129 participants). For two athletes, religion emerged as a salient aspect of who they were, and they
130 were selected as the focus of the current comparative case study due to the richness of their
131 stories in relation to the religious dimension of their lives.

132 “Vincent” (a pseudonym) is a French Canadian, Catholic, 36 years old, professional ice
133 hockey player whose athletic career has taken him to three different continents. At the time of the
134 interviews, Vincent was living and playing in a Nordic country for the second time in his career,
135 while his a wife and their children were living in North America. “Lucas” (pseudonym) is a 34

136 years old distance runner from a Nordic country. He is a Protestant (Lutheran) Christian who had
137 lived in an African country in his childhood. He started running after his family's return
138 migration and has since lived in different places while pursuing education and his athletic career.
139 At the time of the interviews, he was competing at the national level.

140 *Procedure*

141 We chose a life story perspective because it offers a holistic approach that seeks to locate
142 specific events and experiences in the participants' broader biography and their frameworks of
143 meaning. Life story interviews generally aim to follow the interviewees' conceptions and
144 discourse (rather than researchers' conceptual frameworks) and capture how they interpret things
145 and events in their lives (Tagg, 1985). "Vincent" was interviewed by the 2nd author (name), and
146 "Lucas" was interviewed by the 1st author (name). Both athletes participated in two interview
147 sessions each lasting approximately two hours. The interviews loosely followed a chronological
148 approach, where participants were invited to share their stories in their own preferred words,
149 starting from sharing early childhood experiences and memories of family life, friends and
150 school. From there, storytelling moved to educational choices, sports activities, relationships and
151 career development in and outside of sport.

152 "Lucas" located his childhood story directly in a religious community where he had
153 grown up, whereas "Vincent" only started to share stories on religion after interviewer's probe
154 into this topic in the second interview after he had mentioned religion outside of the formal
155 interview. However, once we asked participants to tell more about this aspect of their lives, they
156 were articulate in reflecting on their religious backgrounds and their meaning. Therefore, we
157 asked them to share more stories in relation to their religious beliefs, values and practices and
158 how they felt that religion related to their sporting life projects, if at all. Participants were also

159 invited to elaborate on various turning points in their life stories, the most challenging transition
160 they had experienced, and how they had adapted to different transitions in their lives. In closing,
161 we asked the athletes to think about their future and share their hopes and aspirations. The stories
162 included a number of transition episodes which allowed us to search for and identify patterns in
163 how the athletes constructed meanings and reconstructed daily practices when transitioning into
164 a new life situation.

165 *Data analysis*

166 After the transcriptions had been completed, we spent extensive time on analysing the
167 athletes' stories and discussing them in research meetings. Our main analytic strategy was based
168 on narrative analysis of structure, which seeks to identify the key structures or patterns that hold
169 the personal stories together (Riessman, 2008; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). We sought to identify the
170 structures of the religious identity narratives, athletic identity narratives and the more 'global'
171 self-narratives, and how these various storylines evolved and intersected in the storytelling. As a
172 part of the structural narrative analysis, we employed Stevenson's (1991) and Saroglou's (2011)
173 frameworks to analytically distinguish the identity claims that were made and whether and how
174 different dimensions of religion were integrated to athletes' narratives. Stevenson's typology of
175 Christian athletes' identities (segregated, selective, and committed) was first employed to discern
176 the extent of identity intersection in athletes' life narratives and how the stories surrounding their
177 athletic and religious identities were structured. Secondly, we read the stories for identifying the
178 presence or absence of different dimensions of religion (believing, bonding, behaving, and
179 belonging) and how they were woven into the overall plot of the story. This involved noting
180 aspects of actual daily practices (church attendance, sports training, family interactions, and
181 encounters with other people) and ideational claims about personal beliefs and values.

182 Our second analytic interest was on discerning the performative elements of the stories – that
183 is, what the storytellers chose to include in their stories, what they appeared to achieve by telling
184 these stories, and how religious identities and life transitions were constructed in the telling
185 (Riessman, 2008). We also paid attention to how our probes and questions served to co-construct
186 the stories. Being reflexive that the researcher is always jointly producing the telling, rather than
187 simply hearing/receiving the participant’s story, is central to the performative analysis of
188 narrative. In the following analysis, we will show both the ‘whats’ (story plots and structures)
189 and the ‘hows’ (the intersubjective contexts) of our participants’ life stories.

190 **Results**

191 Since the focus our study was on understanding (1) how the athletes understood the
192 relationship between religion and sport and (2) how these identities intersect (3) in the course of
193 their lives, our representation of the results is a reconstruction of the chronology of participants’
194 life stories which allows for discerning the processes associated with the first two questions. The
195 first section addresses the stories from childhood and adolescence that first establish the
196 storylines surrounding religion and sport. The second section considers the developmental period
197 of late adolescence and early adulthood when identity questions and career choices become a
198 central concern. In the final section, we analyse athletes’ stories about the present and their future
199 orientation to understand their current patterns of meaning-making and religious practice.

200 **Religion and sport in early life: “Don't ever mix God with Sports!”**

201 The religious dimension in Vincent’s life story only becomes explicit in the second
202 interview, which [2nd author, name] opens by saying: “So, I would like to start today by
203 exploring with you the cultural and religious influences in your life. [Off the tape,] we talked
204 about you being Catholic, which is why I feel free to say religious influences as well”. In
205 response, Vincent tells a story about growing up in a Catholic, “very close family” where religion

206 was actively lived and practised. He shared memories of going to church, saying individual
207 prayers, “we thought that was important”, and talked about Christian values that shaped family
208 life. His parents emphasised the need to acquire a good education, but ice hockey soon becomes
209 the central part of his subjective life design and one which (alongside education) is supported by
210 his father. However, although his father is a religious man and at the same time passionate about
211 sport, Vincent remembers learning from a young age that sport and religion are not something to
212 be mixed: “My dad always told me, ‘don’t ever mix God with sports’, ‘don’t ever ask God to
213 help you on the ice – he’s got way more important things to think about than you doing good in
214 sports’”. The way in which Vincent makes sense of his father's words is to construct sport as a
215 fully human endeavour:

216 That [ice hockey] is something that’s me – that I decided to do, something that I enjoyed
217 to do. And you develop a talent for that, and I don’t think God gives you that talent. I
218 think it’s something we develop as humans – it’s more a scientific thing, I think.

219 This story structure develops early in his life story and gives shape to his career narrative in
220 sport, which emphasises secular assets such as, personal agency, internal strength, and social
221 support, rather than a sense of destiny, calling, or guidance. However, he equally emphasises that
222 sport, just as life in general, has to be lived and practised with the right values – for example, the
223 disdain for laziness (which is a Biblical theme) applies to sport, too. Again, his father is a guiding
224 figure in shaping his moral understanding of the game:

225 My dad was a strict but a loving father... He taught you the right values, and the value of
226 working hard, not being lazy, in life and in playing sport. [...] I was young, maybe 10-11,
227 and I just remember him saying, in the car, [...] “I’ll tolerate you playing bad, that
228 happens, but when you’re lazy, I will not accept it – I want you to work hard, but if you

229 have a bad game, you have a bad game. I'll never be mad at you for that, but don't ever
230 be lazy, because, you know, that is cheating everybody and that's not right – it's a team
231 sport.

232 In the informal talks prior to the tape-recorded interviews, [1st author, name] had
233 mentioned to Lucas that she had studied theology and previously conducted research on
234 spirituality in sport. However, similar to Vincent, Lucas didn't quickly delve into religious or
235 spiritual themes but started by sharing his memories of family life, friendships, sport, and school.
236 However, his childhood and early adolescence took place in an explicitly religious context as his
237 parents were missionary workers and they lived in a closed religious community in an Africa
238 country. Whereas Vincent had emphasised values and practices (prayer and church-going), in
239 Lucas's narrative religion is most strongly present as the community within which he is
240 embedded. He describes his parents and his upbringing as "conservative" and recalls that sport
241 was not an important part of the shared family life. Similar to Vincent, he also constructs a
242 potential tension between belief and sport:

243 I've heard or got an impression that in some religious families the parents might ban the
244 child from taking part in sport. That belief is a spiritual thing whereas sport is only
245 physique (...) In our family, they never prohibited taking part [in sport], but in the
246 beginning, they didn't really encourage it either. It was my own choice. [And] even
247 though my father is a pastor, he has never said that sport is a bad thing.

248 The first time sport enters his story is after they had moved to an African country, where
249 "the first time I got to know the local kids was through football... through playing football we got
250 along very well". A story starts to develop where sport becomes a way for him to make a contact
251 with the new place and its people and find embodied pleasure. A turning point in his sporting

252 story is when he gets a tennis teacher at the end of primary school and starts to play regularly: “it
253 was a big thing. I found sport, or sport found me (...) I enjoyed the hard training”. He remembers
254 his father being involved in building the tennis court, but other than that he constructs sport as
255 his own and a secular thing - a storyline which becomes a central life theme. Although sport is
256 played with people who are also members of the religious community, the meaning of sport is
257 not explicitly connected to a religious framework.

258 In summary, in their early stories, both athletes constructed sport as a way of developing
259 one’s secular talent including physical and psychological capabilities, thus separating it on a
260 cognitive level from religion. At the same time, very different trajectories are emerging, whereas
261 Vincent’s athletic development is shaped by a future perspective of a professional career within
262 performance narratives of elite sport, Lucas’s sport involvement is constructed as an effortful, but
263 yet leisurely pursuit without a ‘career’ orientation. This differentiation continues as they move
264 into early adolescence and adulthood.

265 **From adolescence to early adulthood: key moments in the shaping of the life course**

266 Lucas’s family migrated back to their home country in his adolescence, which he described
267 bluntly as “a shock”. Being separated from a closed religious community, he now starts studying
268 in a public school where other students are different: “the others were swearing and I wasn’t used
269 to hearing that, they were disturbing the lessons. Making noise and all that what I could not
270 understand at all”. The values of respect and good manners (including not swearing) that are part
271 of his Christian home culture become conflicted with the secular school culture, making it
272 difficult for him to fit in. Adaptation is challenging for him also because he is approaching a
273 concurrent transition in his educational pathway: “I didn’t know what I wanted to study and do
274 afterwards”. In this crossroad, sport becomes an important embodied anchor to the new place

275 that provides him with a sense of direction and inspiration: “A friend was a national level youth
276 athlete and he inspired me. I went out for some runs and was hooked. I was quite soon running
277 100 km a week”. Looking back, he chooses the initiation of his running career as the biggest
278 turning point in his life, constructing a strong link between sport and his adaptation to the
279 challenging life transition:

280 Yes, running was a way to adapt when we moved back from Africa. I always had a desire
281 to move and now I had a way to channel it. A pair of shoes and a tracksuit is all you need.
282 And through that, I could release my energy. On those runs, I was then reflecting on the
283 change and adaptation and everything that is related to it. (...) And I got a couple of
284 friends through running.

285 The immersion into the competitive running culture through his friend, however, also introduces
286 him to performance narratives of sport which had not been a part of his lifeworld pre-migration.
287 As he recalls:

288 I was so green, I knew nothing about high-performance sports. About seconds or
289 anything. Two minutes in 800 metres, good or bad time, I didn't know. I didn't even
290 know that many distance runners come from African countries, having lived there myself.
291 Although being introduced to the performance dimension of sport and embracing the desire to
292 test out his athletic potential, his embodied experiences and narrative resources allow him to
293 resist the monological stories of running as *only* minutes and seconds. He stories his resistance as
294 a result of his maturity (through becoming immersed in competitive sport only in late
295 adolescence). However, from then on, competitive running becomes his central life theme
296 carrying through studies in a community college in another city, then moving again, starting
297 university studies, and going to a student exchange in another European country. At the same

298 time, being an athlete and living an athletes' life with early morning runs fits his family norms
299 and their Christian lifestyle whereas partying and alcohol consumption was something frowned
300 upon: "My parents still don't really approve of alcohol at all (...) I had my first beer sometime in
301 my exchange year". He talks about conflicts that some religious adolescents may face by
302 "missing out" from "normal" adolescent activities but reflects that sport has helped him in this
303 regard: "it [the sport] has given perspective and I've got friends through sport. Before [starting
304 running], all my friends were from the religious community. So I learned that they are also
305 normal people, the non-religious ones".

306 Vincent's life trajectory becomes shaped by elite sport development from a young age, and
307 he soon starts to design his life around the professionalised athletic career narrative. His parents
308 approve his trajectory to an extent that it can even override the family's religious practices. As he
309 recalls:

310 We went to church almost every Sunday until I can remember. The only time we stopped
311 going was when my hockey got more and more serious and I was playing and I was away,
312 so there was less and less time at the church.

313 At the age of 16, he gets an opportunity to move to another city to play in a league which is
314 heavily scouted by universities, and soon gets a contract to play and study in a US university. For
315 him, the choice to pursue a dual career track at university, rather than a hockey-only pathway, is
316 constructed solely as a way to fulfil his parents' expectations on receiving a good education,
317 rather than a personal ambition. This relational narrative – emphasising the family (religious)
318 values and closeness – shapes his story of transitioning into young adulthood:

319 I just think that whole, growing up like that, just kept us really close as a family and made
320 us feel how family values are important. I left at a young age and I know it was hard on my

321 mom. It was hard [also] on me, but me, I'm a young man and living my life, starting my
322 young adult life, but for my mom, it was hard for her kids to go away from the nest. I felt
323 there was more of a trying to make sure I'm – they're still important in my life.

324 Elsewhere, Lucas's narrative of young adulthood continues with growing independence
325 and settling to live on his own. He continues to pursue sport with a personal coach and develops
326 many friendships through running, in which he reaches the top national level. His educational
327 and professional development is somewhat bumpy with short-term contracts, a period of
328 unemployment and a return to study in the university, but the running life project provides him
329 with a stable structure and meaningful goals. Living on his own, he doesn't attend the mass
330 regularly but doesn't think that this has influenced his personal beliefs in any way. Although he
331 has predominantly separated religion from sport in terms of beliefs and practices, he mentions
332 that recently he has actually brought his sport to the church:

333 Sometimes when I have important competitions, for example, I might go to the church, to
334 get strength and a kind of peace of mind. And if I had a good competition I might go to the
335 church next Sunday, a little bit like to thank God for it.

336 After telling his story up to date, [1st author, name] seeks to inquire how he thinks about religious
337 influences in the bigger picture of his sport involvement. Although he sees religion as an
338 important aspect of how he generally views the world, including optimism and hope for the
339 future, he is hesitant to make very definite links between religion and sport. For example, he
340 doesn't emotionally relate to accounts of running is a mystical or transcendent experience:

341 "running is 90% work. The kind of spiritualism, it is too far from the reality". [1st author, name]
342 also tells that another research participant has shared a story of a father telling him "not to mix
343 God with sports", to which he responds:

344 [It can be seen that] religion is a spiritual thing and sport is only physique (...) and so the
345 physique does not make a person any better or it doesn't bring you any closer to heaven,
346 whereas if you develop yourself spiritually... So this theme is related to Christianity.

347 For Vincent, the pursuit of a professional athletic career leads him to navigate numerous
348 sport-related relocations whilst trying to sustain close family relationships. He experiences some
349 setbacks including a severe injury which leaves him out of contract and forces him to look for
350 opportunities to play outside the prestigious National Hockey League (NHL, top ice hockey
351 league of North America). The tensions between complex family life and the transnational ice
352 hockey career become continue shaping his stories up to the present situation. He feels that his
353 parents have never really supported his marriage, and her child from a previous marriage brings
354 another tension when they are seeking to arrange their family life across borders. His most
355 difficult life transition is moving to Russia to play for a season while his family stays behind:
356 "that was the hardest, hardest thing I've ever done".

357 Vincent talks extensively about challenges in his private life. He also mentions being
358 increasingly removed from the religious community due to his professional pathway, explaining
359 that "with my job and being gone and, I play Sundays, I don't have Sundays off, so we don't go
360 to church that much". Religious practices are furthermore not central to his wife who has been,
361 for some years, taking care of the children while Vincent is abroad playing hockey. Although
362 religious values are part of how he hopes to bring up their children, other dimensions of the
363 religious experience appear to be largely missing.

364 Vincent's narrative construction of sport is ambiguous, as he once says he loves what he
365 does, but on other occasions describes it simply as a way of making a living: "it's my job, but it's
366 not the most important thing in my life". He talks about separating sport life and private life, not

367 letting situations on the ice affect the home life and vice versa. At the same time, the sporting
368 successes and failures have a strong impact on him, but he tends to keep his feelings to himself.
369 After hearing the life story up to the present situation, [2nd author, name] asks him to reflect on
370 the relationship between his religious life and sport:

371 [2nd author, name]: I'm wondering if you have experienced (...) religious influence in
372 your sport at all? Like, whether that was or has been a factor in your career, in any way.
373 Vincent: Religiously, I don't think so. I don't think I can relate religiously to what I do
374 now. I think the only way I can relate is like I said, things that you learn how to be as a
375 human being that has helped me through my career. But also I think it's also not helped
376 me because you know the expression "good guys come last"? When you're in this kind of
377 business in a high, high level, I've always experienced that if you're a good guy and you
378 go along, most of the time it doesn't work (...) I've seen guys that are not good people at
379 all, that have – maybe didn't deserve, as a human being, to get any kind of chance, and
380 maybe even their talent wasn't – but for some reason [they did it]. Maybe their arrogance,
381 showing an air of confidence, and it just – better talkers, knew better how to be – better
382 communicators with their higher-ups, their coaches.

383 For Vincent, the Christian values of justice, humility and being 'a good person' appear
384 contradictory to the nature of elite sport and his observation that it could be arrogance and
385 (over)confidence that brought success. However, throughout the interviews, he maintains that he
386 has not segregated religious and sporting values, even if he has observed that that is how the elite
387 sport world seems to work sometimes. He then explains that when he came to a Nordic country,
388 he had finally found a team where the culture is congruent with his (Christian) values of being a
389 hard worker and a good person:

390 I fit in so well. I'm more reserved and I rely on my hard work, and being team player, and
391 that's what I love about here. There's no BS and it's straightforward – you're a hard worker
392 and a good person – that's the culture that's here. (...) This is the only place where I've
393 said in the past that I feel comfortable with the kind of team and the principles that I
394 admire – that I want to be part of.

395 In summary, although the participants' stories shift as they search for their place in the
396 sport world and the broader society, both athletes continue constructing a life story where their
397 religion forms a ground of being shaping their values and basic attitudes towards sport life. Both
398 athletes construct their life paths strongly around the athletic career trajectory albeit in very
399 different institutional settings (professional vs amateur). However, both start to become distanced
400 from religious practices and communities in the course of multiple (developmental, cultural,
401 athletic) life transitions, developing stories of a more individualised, private religion.

402 **From the present towards anticipated futures**

403 Being mature athletes approaching their final years in the peak phase of elite athletic career,
404 both athletes are reflective of the anticipated, or at least socially expected retirement from the
405 elite sport. In his mid-30s, Lucas is acutely aware of the deviant trajectory that his life is
406 following and seeks to justify this:

407 My brother is married and has two children, whereas I'm single and live alone. Well, I
408 bought my own apartment and I'm building my life that way. But I don't have a
409 family(...) We talk about the contemporary society that is it diverse and there doesn't
410 need to be just one way. Being aware of that helps. Also many others, like individual
411 athletes.

412 He also mentions his parents' traditional views on life, and how "they have asked me many times
413 when I am going to retire [from sport], start living a normal life... and so I have had to justify

414 myself, prove that I can take care of things even if I train twice a day”. Aware of the normative
415 life scripts of adulthood and the possibility that he might have passed his athletic peak, he has
416 explored his own motives and meaning of running. The early sporting experiences disconnected
417 from the dominant performance narrative provide him with narrative resources to construct the
418 joy of sport as his key life theme, and he continues to pursue his athletic life project with the
419 entry into Veteran athletics in sight: “it is not too long before I can compete in the over 50
420 category (laughing)”. He also says that if he finds a life partner, she needs to accept that running
421 is important for him: “I can do it less, but to stop doing something that I’ve enjoyed to do for
422 such a long time...” Interactions with the Veteran athletes in his club provide him with further
423 exemplary stories of how sport can be an integral aspect of life also in the future. He views his
424 hope for a bright future in his sport life project, possibly as a Veteran athlete, as a part of his
425 religious worldview: “the best is still ahead, that is also a religious understanding”.

426 Meanwhile, Vincent’s life design is shaped by an anticipated disengagement from the
427 sport-work: “I’m not going to do this for the rest of my life, so I [need to] think what’s in the rest
428 of your life – your wife, kids, that’s who you want [to be], that takes a priority on anything else.”
429 He doesn’t have a contract for the next season, which he sees that as a good opportunity to “take
430 a time out” and analyse his life. He repeatedly states that his family is the priority and looks
431 forward to being closer to them. He also has an idea for working as some kind of cultural
432 consultant in sport, helping transnational athletes in adaptation to new teams in new cultural
433 locations. However, religiosity is largely absent from his future perspective and he does not talk
434 about reintegration to a religious community – perhaps because his wife doesn’t share his
435 Catholic beliefs and practices. He talks about still believing, but:

436 As you get older (...) you start becoming your own person and you start seeing things

437 different ways sometimes, and you're exposed to more things. I feel like there is a God,
438 there is an afterlife, but I feel you're in control of your destiny.

439 In summary, both athletes think about their current lives and futures within an increasingly
440 individualised framework of spirituality which is grounded on Christian values and fundamental
441 beliefs about the world but doesn't rely on active communal practices.

442 **Discussion**

443 Through in-depth life story interviews, we sought to understand how religion and sport
444 intersect in Christian elite athletes' life narratives. In relation to Saroglou's (2011) dimensions
445 of religion (believing, behaving, bonding, and belonging) and Stevenson's (1991) typology of
446 Christian athletes (segregated, selective, and committed), we traced multiple ways in which
447 athletes talked about religion and how it impacted their journeys in sport. First, throughout their
448 life narratives, athletes largely separated religion from sport on the levels of believing, bonding,
449 and belonging. In contrast to previous studies (see Balague, 1999; Mosley et al., 2015), the
450 Christian athletes did not indicate that they felt God had given them the athletic talent or
451 vocation to play sport. Instead, they were narrating sport development primarily as a secular,
452 human endeavour and did not construct injuries or setbacks a part of God's bigger plan (in
453 contrast to Grindstaff et al., 2010). Although Stevenson (1991) suggested that often the
454 segregated athletes simply did not know how to integrate their sport and religion, the
455 participants in the study were articulate in explaining why they thought that sport should be
456 primarily understood as a secular activity. This illustrates the diversity of interpretations that
457 can be made of the Christian doctrine in relation to the body and sports (Scarpa & Carraro
458 2011) and provides a different account from the most often reported integrative views where
459 religious beliefs shape meanings athletes assign to sport practices (e.g., Mosley et al., 2015).
460 These findings can be partly explained by the difference in theological positions that Christian

461 churches adopt on religion and sport that tend to fluctuate over time dependent on cultural
462 locations and traditions of specific denominations (McGrath, 2008). For example, despite
463 visible examples of sport and religion interface such as sport chaplaincy, some Christian church
464 leaders continue to see sport as something that potentially counters spiritual development
465 (Parker & Watson, 2014). These findings highlight the diversity of interpretations within
466 Christianity when it comes to the meaning and value of sport practices.

467 In terms of bonding (i.e., religious practices to connect with the transcendent), Vincent
468 again expressed segregated views, (“don’t ever ask God to help you on the ice”) whereas
469 Lucas’s account was more selective and ambiguous. Although a link between religious
470 practices (going to Church and prayer) and sporting life is absent from his childhood narratives,
471 it later emerges and marks a potential shift in his relationship with God in his adulthood. Yet, he
472 rejects a relatively new popular discourse of distance running as spiritual activity (e.g.,
473 Simpson, Post, Young, & Jensen, 2014), which could indicate that such discourses might not
474 resonate so well with athletes with a more traditional religious worldview.

475 Despite the segregated and selective elements in the storytelling, the athletes also
476 consistently constructed a story aligned with the committed type in relation to Christian values
477 in sport. They emphasised the importance of Christian values and virtues in their lives in and
478 outside of sport (e.g., work ethic, justice, respect, hope), clearly indicating that they thought
479 God cared about how they conduct themselves in sport life (i.e., God separates the person from
480 the activity). Although the athletes were aware that sometimes “the good guy” might not get
481 rewarded for their ethical behaviour in sport, the strong dissonance between their Christian
482 values and the moral code of sport described by Stevenson (1991) was absent from their stories.
483 This highlights that although some athletes might think it is not appropriate to “mix God with

484 sports”, religion could still have an influence on their sport lives that matters for their career
485 development and well-being.

486 In the journeys through multiple life transitions, the stories involved a common temporal
487 pattern where athletes started to become distanced from communal religion. This movement
488 was influenced by sport (i.e., making non-religious friends through sport for Lucas and
489 prioritising hockey over churchgoing for Vincent) and also reflects the broader cultural shift
490 where traditional church practices are losing their grip especially on the younger generations
491 (Davie, 2007). Although the athletes expressed agency in moving towards a more
492 individualised form of religiosity, the requirements to compete on Sundays and relocate to
493 secure employability (for Vincent) also forced a separation from active religious practices and
494 communities. Furthermore, narratively reframing religion as a personal and inner dimension
495 could be a part of their cultural adaptation to the secular Nordic societies. That is, although the
496 religious landscape in the Nordic countries has become more complex with multi-culturalism
497 and new forms of spirituality emerging, religion has been predominantly considered a private
498 and individual issue (Bäckström, 2014). As Saroglou (2011) observed, in highly secularised
499 societies, religion is often thought more like an intrinsic attitude whereas extrinsic religion (of
500 collective practices) is less relevant. Athletes’ stories about individualised religion align well
501 with the cultural context where they were embedded in and could be seen as part of the
502 meaning reconstruction that forms a vital aspect of cultural transition (Ryba, Stambulova, &
503 Ronkainen, 2016). While the athletes themselves maintained that their belief has been sustained
504 with certain modifications without active religious practices, scholars have raised questions
505 about possibilities of ‘believing without belonging’, arguing that “the passivity of so-called
506 ‘believers’ is itself a sign of religious decline” (Voas & Crockett, 2005, p. 24). This said it is

507 evident that religion continued to influence participants' lives in the form of basic assumptions
508 about the world, personal values, and deep-held religious cultural expectations.

509 From a narrative perspective, a life story is never a pure reflection of inner life, but a
510 relational construction shaped by the intended audience(s) and the immediate intersubjective
511 context (McAdams, 2008; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). It is likely that the participants (especially
512 Vincent) would have only briefly discussed religion, if at all, without the interviewer
513 introducing the topic. Blodgett et al. (2017) suggested that the sport culture applies a "don't
514 ask, don't tell" norm in relation to religion, and therefore athletes may hesitate to discuss their
515 religion in a sports-related context. It is likely that the increasingly secularised context with the
516 cultural norm of religion as a private issue had further prevented athletes from discussing their
517 faith in a sport-related situation. Vincent told [2nd author, name] that no one had ever asked him
518 this kind of questions, indicating that religion was omitted from his public life as an athlete.
519 Our participants had grown up in very traditional Christian families and were clearly outliers to
520 the dominant norm of secularised cultural Christianity in the Nordic context (Zuckerman,
521 2009); thus, they were likely to be aware that certain religious expressions may not be well
522 received by people in the national cultural contexts in which they were embedded. However,
523 once the interviewers had shown empathetic interest in how religion manifests in their lives,
524 athletes were willing to discuss their views and experiences.

525 As the case study has illustrated, athletes have individual and unique ways of bringing
526 religion into their sport life, and it is important that applied practitioners are aware of this
527 diversity. As Andersen (1993) reminded us, variance is always large within any cultural group,
528 and we may easily become "sensitive stereotypers" rather than "sensitive" on a truly individual
529 basis. If athletes choose to bring their religion into discussions with the applied sport

530 psychology practitioners, it is essential that the practitioners seek to suspend their assumptions
531 about that particular religion and demonstrate positive regard and respect to their clients’
532 worldviews (Sarkar et al., 2015). For this to take place, it is important that practitioners are self-
533 reflective about their own attitudes towards religion and how they shape their interactions with
534 the client. In the psychological literature, religion is sometimes considered merely as a defence
535 mechanism (Pargament, 2011) and religion has become increasingly associated with the
536 traditional, institutional and “bad” (Pargament, 1999), which in turn can influence the ways in
537 which sport psychology practitioners think about religion. Furthermore, there is a need to
538 understand the cultural contexts which will influence whether any topic becomes expressed or
539 silenced. Although some athletes might not readily introduce religion as a topic of discussion, it
540 does not imply that it might not be an important aspect of their lives.

541 As a limitation of the present study, the interviews were conducted with the aim of
542 eliciting broad life stories and not specifically focused on religion. However, the fact that the
543 participants were prepared to talk about their religious beliefs and practices indicates that they
544 were important for them. We acknowledge that other cultural identities (of gender, ethnicity,
545 etc.) intersect in athletes’ life narratives to shape their religious experience, but other
546 intersecting identities were not analysed in the current study; however, it should be remembered
547 that the results reflect the stories of two white males. Finally, our study revealed important
548 differences to previous studies on Christian athletes’ experiences in sport (e.g., Balague, 1999;
549 Grindstaff et al., 2010; Mosley et al., 2015), highlighting diversity within the identity ‘category’
550 of a Christian athlete. In future work, it will be valuable to conduct research in various cultural
551 locations and with more diverse participants to extend our understandings of the role of religion
552 in athletes’ lives.

553

Conclusions

554 The present study sought to explore the role of religion in Christian elite athletes' life transitions
555 and life journeys. In contrast to many previous findings on religious meaning-making in sport,
556 the athletes narratively separated religious belief from sport practice and constructed sport as a
557 secular life project. In the athletes' stories, however, religion's role was the most prominent as a
558 source of values (that also apply in sport) and basic world assumptions and that were largely
559 sustained through various life transitions. Through performative narrative analysis, we also
560 illustrated the tensions in expressing the religious dimension of the life-world in a secularised
561 cultural context, which has important implications for the applied practitioner working with
562 religious athletes. An awareness of the potential importance of the religious and/or spiritual
563 dimension, even if it might not be immediately expressed, is important for researchers and
564 practitioners when seeking to develop a truly holistic understanding of the athlete.

565

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