

**Challenging the Secular Bias in the Sociology of Sport:
Scratching the Surface of Christian approaches to Sociology**

Tom Gibbons

Introduction

In a recent essay published in the *Sociology of Sport Journal* (one of the leading journals in the sub-discipline of the sociology of sport), Shilling and Mellor (2014: 350) argue that the topic of ‘religion’ has been “marginalized” in sociological analysis of sport over the last two decades. Part of their argument is that “studies focused purely on the secular dimensions of sport can be unhelpfully narrow” (Ibid: 352). The goal of this chapter is to begin to address this void through identifying Christian approaches to sociology that are yet to be drawn upon by sociologists of sport (see also Parker and Watson, 2016).

Whilst studies exist on the relationship between sport and various ‘faiths’ or ‘religions’, the interface between sport and Christianity is the fastest growing area of research within this field (see Watson and Parker, 2014). However, this area of scholarship appears to be dominated by sports theologians, philosophers, psychologists and historians and, at present, lacks examples of theoretically informed and/or empirically based sociological work.¹ Whilst there are some scholars attempting to adopt a more sociological standpoint on research into sport and Christianity,² at present there appears to be little if any reflection on Christian approaches to sociology within this literature or indeed within the sociology of sport per se (see for instance

¹ See for example the diversity of scholars mentioned in Watson and Parker’s (2013; 2014) comprehensive systematic reviews of literature on sport and Christianity.

² For instance, see some of the recent research on sport, Christianity and disability by Parker and colleagues, some of which contains sociological elements: Howe and Parker, 2012; 2014; Parker and Watson, 2014; Watson and Parker, 2015.

Horne, 2015). So far no purposeful attempts have been made to specifically discuss the connection between Christian approaches to sociology and the sociology of sport. In this exploratory essay, I aim to begin to address what appears to be a lacuna in the literature surrounding sports and Christianity and present a challenge to the secular bias that has saturated the sociology of sport to date. The motivation for the essay lies in my desire to spark debate between Christian and non-Christian scholars and to encourage further debate on the potential connections between Christian approaches to sociology and the sociology of sport.

The essay is divided into three sections. In the first, the paradox regarding the growth of Christianity (especially that over the last century) and the claims made by advocates of the secularisation thesis are briefly discussed. In the second section, further evidence is provided from Shilling and Mellor (2014) concerning the secular bias in the sociology of sport. The cause of this is attributed to the fact that the sociology of sport mirrors its parent discipline (sociology). In the third section of this essay, the historical work of Brewer (2007) regarding the distinction between ‘religious sociology’ and ‘the sociology of religion’ is drawn upon and three main areas of what might be considered ‘Christian approaches to sociology’ are outlined with a view to encouraging sociologists of sport to explore these resources for themselves. The intention here is not to make definitive links between Christian approaches to sociology and the sociological study of sport but to open the door to a set of perspectives that so far remain largely unexplored by those undertaking sociological analyses of sport.

The growth of Christianity in a secular age

The term ‘secularization’ refers to a process whereby identifications with ‘religious’ values and institutions decline and are replaced by ‘irreligious’ values and ‘secular’ institutions in a particular society. This occurred in Western societies following the 17th century ‘Enlightenment period’ or ‘scientific revolution’ which resulted in what are known as the

‘modernizing revolutions’ of the 18th and 19th centuries, including the American and French political revolutions and the British Industrial Revolution. In response to what became known as the ‘modernization’ of Western societies, the ‘secularization thesis’ - that the decline of religiosity would be one of outcomes of the progressive modernization of society - was conceived by classical social theorists such as Karl Marx, Max Weber, Émile Durkheim and others from the latter part of the 19th century onwards. According to one of its contemporary adherents, Bryan Wilson (1998), the core concerns of the secularization thesis include ‘religion’ losing claims to ‘authority’ and therefore the legitimate production of ‘knowledge’ in all aspects of social life (Han, 2015).

The subsequent dominance of the secularization thesis in Western societies meant that for much of the 20th century “religion ... tended to be restricted to the private sphere” (Brewer, 2007: 9). According to Berger (1999) we began to witness the ‘desecularization’ of the world in the late 20th century and there has been (and continues to be) a global resurgence in religious adherents. Yet Christianity has been expanding on a global scale beyond Europe since at least 1500 and at a particularly rapid rate since 1900 (O’Donnell, 2009). Threlfall-Holmes (2012: 129) states that Christianity has grown significantly, “from around 500 million adherents in 1900 to around 2 billion in 2000, nearly a third of the world’s population.” She goes on to add that:

Such growth has confounded the belief, increasingly frequently expressed over the course of the twentieth century until its final decade, that secularism was rapidly spreading and that Christianity, and indeed religion in general, was an outdated mindset that would soon be eclipsed or eradicated (Ibid).

For example, despite secular claims that the Christian church in Britain is in decline, the contributions to Goodhew's (2012) edited text *Church Growth in Britain: 1980 to the Present* highlight clear signs of vitality and growth across various denominations since the 1980s. Current statistics indicate that growth of the Protestant church is limited to Pentecostal/charismatic churches and/or those congregations emerging from immigrant populations in Britain (Davie, 2015; Gibbons, forthcoming). Another example is the rapid growth of the Pentecostal church which began in 1906 following the Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles. Jennings (2015: 62) argues that this,

constitutes Christianity's most compelling response to secularisation theory. Here we have, beginning in the 20th century, a religious movement that grew from zero to half a billion – all in the midst of an era when religion was supposed to be in decline.

As is the case for other disciplines within the social sciences (including anthropology, history and psychology for example), a cursory glance at the mainstream sociology literature outside of sport reveals a strong secular bias and this is a point readily recognised by scholars within the sociology of religion (see for example Brewer, 2007; Fraser and Campolo, 1992; Perkins, 1987; Turner, 2014). Turner (2014: 774-5) states that there has been a “revival of the sociology of religion in the late 20th and early 21st century” which is “associated with growing recognition of the importance of religion in public life”. Moreover, the “post-secularization thesis” of the well-known contemporary social theorist Jürgen Habermas (2006 cited in Turner, 2014: 773) argues that “secular and religious citizens have a duty to engage in dialogue within the public sphere in the interests of a liberal consensus” (Turner, 2014: 771-2) – a point that helps to underpin my own rationale for exposing the secular bias that has been inherent within the sub-discipline of sports sociology.

The secular bias within the sociology of sport

In the introductory chapter of their edited text *With God on Their Side: Sport in the Service of Religion*, Magdalinski and Chandler (2002:1) claim that sport and ‘religion’ possess “disparate philosophical foundations”. Although this proposition sounds justifiable in reference to the hyper-commodified global sports industry of the 21st century, such a view ignores the history behind the genesis of modern sports which owes much to the ‘muscular Christianity’ imbued in them via the Victorian English public schools and which was subsequently propagated throughout the British Empire and beyond by Christian athletic missionaries (see for example Mangan, 1984; 1986). These values or virtues of sport include: “teamwork, altruism, strength, self-control, justice, loyalty, wisdom, self-sacrifice, equality, courage, generosity, joy, honesty, tenacity, hard work, solidarity, peace, love (*Philia*, friendship love) and community spirit” (Watson and Parker, 2013: 28). Thus, it can be argued that Christian values *rather than those of any other faith* are the very foundations of some of today’s global sports (see also Parker and Weir, 2012; Watson et al, 2005).

During the 20th century sports began to gradually lose the Christian values that were once at their core and sociologists of sport have written about this from a variety of theoretical perspectives. In his ‘historical-sociological’ study based largely upon Weber’s rationalisation thesis and Calvinist Protestantism, Overman (2011) demonstrates how American elite sport became riddled with ethical and moral problems over the course of the 20th century as a consequence of its increasing professionalization, commodification and commercialization. The Marxist scholar Brohm (1979) referred to modern sport as ‘a prison of measured time’ arguing that athlete’s bodies are treated as machines designed to produce entertainment and profits for others rather than for feelings of fun and pleasure for themselves. Moreover, Lasch (1979) famously referred to ‘the degradation of sport’ in relation to the loss of the ‘sacred

dimension of play' in the pursuit of winning (as well as other aspects); and Walsh and Giulianotti (2007) have more recently referred to the ethical and moral problems in contemporary sport as 'the sporting mammon'.³ In turn,, Watson and Parker (2013: 28-9) list a number of areas of research that have been conducted by sport sociologists, psychologists and philosophers on the ethical and moral problems that have become entrenched in sport due to it becoming a business primarily focused on money-making. Examples of topics of research include: abuse of athletes, officials and others involved in sport; violence both on and off the field of play involving athletes, fans and others; political/national divisions; sectarianism; cheating; playing through pain and injury; overtraining; burnout; financial greed and corruption; use of performance enhancing drugs/doping and others.

These problems are strongly related to the dissolution of Christian ethics in modern-day sport and have fuelled wider discussion (see for example Dixon and Gibbons, 2015). Nevertheless, Shilling and Mellor (2014: 350) state that although "analyses of sport and religion, and various aspects of their relationships, exist...these tend to occupy a discrete corner in sports studies". Horne (2015) has recently produced a comprehensive bibliography listing the core readings across the entire area of the sociology of sport and nowhere is the topic of 'religion' given prominence, other than indirectly in relation to classic studies of sectarianism in Northern Ireland (Sugden and Bairner, 1993) and Scotland (Murray, 1983). In this sense it is fair to say that sociological analyses of sport and 'religion' do exist but they remain on the fringes of wider debate. Shilling and Mellor (2014: 350) state that: "Sociological studies of sport have, during the last two decades, established their subject matter as central to a wide range of social and cultural, disciplinary and interdisciplinary, concerns." However, they go on to recognise that: "One area marginalized in most of these studies...is religion" (Ibid.).

³ In the New Testament 'Mammon' is referred to as material wealth or greed, and is often personified as a false idol (see for instance Matthew 6:19-21).

Furthermore, these authors posit that “sociologists who focus on sport’s secular impact often view religious adherence as a remnant of traditional practices. More frequently, they ignore religion altogether” (Ibid: 351). Shilling and Mellor argue that “analysing sport purely as a secular phenomenon, and marginalizing its religious significance, is potentially antagonistic to a broader attempt to grasp its societal importance” (Ibid: 351). Shilling and Mellor (Ibid.: 352) go on to develop what they describe as “a novel theoretical account of sport’s centrality to social life, attentive to its secular, religious and sacred aspects” by using what are widely considered to be two of the ‘founding fathers’ of the discipline of sociology, Émile Durkheim and Max Weber. The former argued that ‘religion’ and the ‘sacred’ persist in modern societies playing a role in maintaining social order; whereas the latter suggested that the increasing rationalisation of modern societies diminished the significance of ‘religion’ and the ‘sacred’.

Whilst Shilling and Mellor (2014) should be commended for recognizing the dominance of secular studies within the sociology of sport and advocating an approach that takes into account both secular and ‘religious’ viewpoints on the social significance of sport, their approach has one significant limitation. Despite aiming to highlight that a secular bias within the sociology of sport exists and subsequently calling for scholars not to divorce the ‘religious’ and the ‘sacred’ within their work, Shilling and Mellor unintentionally reinforce the secular bias within the sub-discipline of sports sociology by only drawing upon secularist theorists to guide their analytical framework. Both Durkheim and Weber were in fact atheists as are the majority of the social theorists utilised within the discipline of sociology and concomitantly it seems in the sub-discipline of sports sociology. There are four significant atheists who were the ‘classical social theorists’ involved in the development of the subject matter of sociology: Auguste Comte; Émile Durkheim; Karl Marx; and, Max Weber. Of these the “‘holy trinity’ of Marx, Weber and Durkheim,” are the most widely used within sociology (Shilling, 2011: 2) and correspondingly in sports sociology. Perhaps somewhat ironically, all

three had much to say about the role of religion in modern societies (Turner, 2014: 772). Yet secular theorists are not the only ones to be involved in the establishment of the discipline of sociology.

Hidden and long forgotten? An outline of Christian approaches to sociology

Sociologists and Christians have a good deal to say to each other. Unfortunately, what is said is often not encouraging (Perkins, 1987: 13).

The above statement suggests that something of an impasse exists between Christianity and sociology. Whilst this may be true today, it has not always been the case. There are some early social thinkers who wrote from a distinctly Christian perspective. One who pre-dates the establishment of the subject matter for sociology, let alone its institution as a distinct discipline, was an Italian Catholic named Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) who “argued for the development of a new science that would unveil the laws governing the rise and fall of nations” (Fraser and Campolo, 1992: 17). In the second edition of his book *Principles of a New Science Concerning the Common Nature of the Nations*, Vico (1730 cited in Ibid.) posited that humans cannot be studied in the same ways as nature is studied by the natural sciences. Here Vico suggested that only God could fully understand the forces governing the physical world because He created it and that human beings could only ever gain a partial understanding of this world as they were merely created as part of it - and were not its creators. However, Vico suggested that humans may understand social knowledge more fully than the physical world given that they create their social worlds which consist of various relationships they form with one another. Fraser and Campolo point out that Vico’s work came well before that of Auguste Comte (1798-1857), the Frenchman often credited as the founding father of sociological

thought and who famously argued that “sociology was the new religion” (Brewer, 2007: 10). As Fraser and Campolo (1992: 17-18) go on to assert:

Since Vico’s idea for sociology was published a hundred years before Comte’s, why is Vico not acknowledged as the founder of sociology? Is this a reflection of the bias of secularists who do not wish to acknowledge Christians at the very foundations of sociology?

Vico is not an anomaly. There have, in fact, been other Christians from the US and Europe who have been significantly involved in the beginnings of sociology itself yet whose work is not readily referred to by modern-day sociologists. Examples include (in chronological order by birth): Frédéric Le Play (1806-1882), Eilert Sundt (1817-1875), Albion Small (1854-1926) and Paul Göhre (1864-1928). Le Play was a French Catholic who wrote the first major empirical sociological study entitled *The European Workers* (1855 cited in Ibid: 21), which was six volumes in length. Sundt was an ordained Lutheran minister who pioneered sociological research into the social and economic conditions of the poor in Norway (Reinertsen, 1969 cited in Ibid: 21-2). Small was the Chair and founder of the first graduate department of sociology in the world located at the University of Chicago in the USA (Ibid.). He was also a theologically trained son of a Baptist preacher as well as being a Baptist deacon for much of his adult life (Brewer, 2007: 11). Small established the *American Journal of Sociology* in 1895 and was one of the only American sociologists of his era to have “retained his Christian commitment” (Ibid: 12). In 1891 Göhre, a Protestant pastor and theologian, initiated empirical sociology in Germany when he conducted a participant observation study of German factory workers entitled *Three Months as a Factory Worker* in which he highlighted structural forces leading to the disintegration of the family. Göhre later went on to work with Max Weber on an

empirical study of agricultural labour in Eastern Prussia (Oberschall, 1965 cited in Fraser and Campolo, 1992: 22). Along with Vico, these scholars appear to be largely ignored by secular sociology and one would be hard pressed to find any reference to them within the sociology of sport. Thus, the first area worthy of further exploration by sociologists of sport is the work by early Christian sociological thinkers.

Second, it is important to consider what Brewer (2007) has termed ‘religious sociology’, which upon closer examination, seems to have been entirely Christian in nature. Brewer (2007: 7) makes an interesting distinction between what he terms ‘religious sociology’ where “sociology is put to serve faith” and the ‘secular sociology of religion’ where “religion is studied scientifically”. This ‘religious sociology’ contributed significantly to the development of early sociology in Britain, France and the US (although its development within these countries differs somewhat). Yet this form of sociology through the lens of Christian faith lies underdeveloped and has been obscured from the history of the discipline of sociology in these countries according to Brewer (2007:8).

If one looks hard enough it is clearly evident that there have been attempts since the late 19th century to establish an essentially ‘Christian sociology’ or to at least consider the interface between Christianity and sociology seriously from the perspective of the Christian faith. I will refer to this literature as ‘Christian Sociology’ hereafter abandoning the term ‘religious sociology’ which I consider too broad to be meaningful. The earliest work in this area is somewhat helpfully entitled *Christian Sociology*. This text was originally published in the US in 1880 and was written by a theology professor at Wittenberg College in Springfield Ohio by the name of John Henry Wilbrandt Stuckenberg (see Stuckenberg, 1881).⁴ Much of Stuckenberg’s controversial book was written from a Liberal Protestant standpoint, which Brewer (2007: 11) states, “has always been socially reformist and committed to social progress.

⁴ I refer here to the version of the text published in London in 1881 in this essay.

This is reflected in significant philanthropy and campaigning for social reform but also in the desire to make Christianity relevant to modern society”. Indeed, this seminal work is focused upon justifying the need for a Christian approach to studying society and defining the link between Christianity and sociology. Despite its focus on society in the late 19th century, the following passage from Stuckenberg’s (1881: 16) argument encapsulates what Christian Sociology has the potential to do today:

Social problems are constantly arising which should receive their solution from a Christian standpoint. Many of these problems are of vast importance, and present an inviting field for the application of the principles of the Gospel – an application that is much needed, and which promises to be fruitful of rich results. Why leave the most important civil and social questions of the day to the solutions of a worldly philosophy and of a godless political economy? Why not make the ethics of the New Testament the test of all social theories? The problems connected with education, with capital and labor, with the relations of employer and employé, problems connected with politics, and with the various social relations and social life – all should be discussed by Christians in the light of the Gospel, and should be settled according to its spirit. This is essential to social welfare.

Could various sociological issues and problems that pervade contemporary sport be added to the list identified by Stuckenberg? Examples of similar texts from the early 20th century include Moss’s (1924) *Studies in the Christian Gospel for Society* and Penty’s (1924) *Towards a Christian Sociology*. Both texts went against the “secularism inherent in sociology” and were subsequently regarded as “religiosity” which was “a practice not acceptable to the guardians

of the discipline” who only condoned “religion” as a topic of ‘serious’ social scientific investigation (Brewer, 2007: 12).

As a brief aside, an interesting example of a Christian (Lutheran) with an interest in secularisation and modernity who opted for significance within mainstream sociology rather than seeking to develop an explicitly Christian perspective was Peter Berger. Berger and Luckmann had a significant impact on the sociology of knowledge with their ground-breaking book *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (1966) in which they regarded the “study of religion as an inseparable component of the sociology of knowledge” according to Turner (2014: 773). Turner states that alongside their subsequent separate works on the sociology of religion (see Berger 1967) and Luckmann (1967), this particular text led to a “revival of the sociology of religion as part of the core curriculum of the sociological discipline” (Turner, 2014: 773). Yet, ironically, this has acted as the main stimulus for the development of the secular sociology of religion rather than to the advancement of a distinctly Christian sociology. As an aside, key contemporary scholars in the secular sociology of religion have paid scant attention to the social significance and impact of sport (see for example, Beckford and Demerath, 2008; Davie, 2000; 2013; 2015).

From the 1970s a number of sociological books written from a Christian (Protestant evangelical) perspective began to emerge in the US and there are now a growing number of such titles.⁵ Whilst space restricts how much can be said about these texts, their increase is evidence enough that the debate between Christianity and sociology is alive and well. Needless to say, such texts represent a second area ripe for exploration by sociologists of sport.

In addition to the Christian sociology books referred to here, there have been a number of Christian contributions to early editions of the longest standing mainstream academic

⁵ See for example: Campolo (1995); Fraser and Campolo (1992); Grunland and Reimer (1991); Hunter (2010); Perkins (1987); Poythress (2011); Schmidt and Heybyrne (2004); Wright (2010).

journals in the discipline of sociology. Also early presidents of the ‘American Sociological Society’ were apparently Protestant ministers before becoming sociologists (Oberschall, 1972 cited in Fraser and Campolo, 1992: 21). Unfortunately, this kind of sociology either became isolated, marginalised and/or succumbed to the mainstream secularised trend throughout much of the 20th century. Whilst the Catholic church retained involvement in the social sciences and ‘Catholic sociologists’ remained active as they are today, they were ostracized by the secular sociological mainstream (Brewer, 2007).

In comparison to both France and the US, the trajectory was somewhat different in Britain (Brewer 2007: 16). Clergy of the Church of England were involved in the establishment of ‘The Sociological Society’ in Britain in 1903 and were contributing to the *Sociological Papers* (the forerunner to *The Sociological Review*) from its inception in 1904 and well into the 1920s (Brewer, 2007: 17). Yet “as academic sociology developed in Britain in the 1930s, the Christian sociologists disconnected themselves from the mainstream as it secularized.” A distinct journal of Christian sociology called *Christendom* that ran from 1931 to 1950 acts as evidence of the partition (Brewer, 2007: 20). There have been other Christian sociology journals and organizations, some of which are still in existence. As Brewer (2007: 13-14) notes “a Christian sociologists’ prayer group” has long been active in the USA which “eventually became the Christian Sociological Society in the 1970s. There is also the association of Christians Teaching Sociology [ACTS], founded in 1976”. The website of ACTS (2015) contains both a bibliography and a resources section listing a wealth of useful material that could be reviewed by sports sociologists. A more recent example of a Christian sociology journal is the *Journal for the Sociological Integration of Religion and Society* which began in 2011 and publishes two issues per year. The mission of the journal is “to provide a forum for the latest research and inquiry relative to the sociological integration of the Christian religion and society” (JSIRS, 2015). To summarise, it would appear that Christian contributions to early

versions of mainstream sociology journals, specifically issues of the journal *Christendom*, as well as more recent journals for Christian sociology, have yet to be used in any sociological analyses of sport. Added to the books cited above, such resources represent the second area of Christian sociology ripe for further excavation by sports sociologists.

Finally, the third area worthy of more thorough investigation by sociologists of sport is that which links sociology with theology. Brewer (2007: 21) argues that sociology and theology were eventually successfully combined in Britain in the late 1970s stimulating new “sociological work by biblical scholars”. Robin Gill, an Anglican clergyman and Emeritus Professor in Applied Theology at the University of Kent (UK), has recently produced three volumes on ‘Sociological Theology’ in which he revisits three elements that make up the dialogue between theologians and sociologists (Gill, 2012a; 2012b; 2013). This developing area of research might be useful to sociologists of sport. Gill (2012a: 11) invites both theologians and sociologists to explore the intersections, conflicts and consensuses between the two disciplines in the following passage:

It should not in principle be too difficult for the competent theologian to acquire a certain measure of expertise in sociological terms, or for the sociologist to acquire a similar expertise in theological terms.

It is hoped that this will encourage sociologists of sport to embark on a new journey of discovery of this burgeoning field of study. If it does, who knows what new gems might be found.

Conclusion

To conclude, this exploratory essay has argued for a challenge to be made to the supremacy of secular studies within the sociology of sport through the exploration of Christian approaches to sociology. First, excavations of the work of early Christian social theorists and thinkers including Vico, Le Play, Sundt, Small, Göhre and others would be beneficial in order to determine whether an alternative Christian theoretical toolkit exists for establishing a distinct Christian sociology of sport. Second, a systematic review of texts specifically written by Christians on the relationship between Christianity and sociology since the late 19th century would help to determine the full diversity of Christian approaches that exist and in turn which (if indeed any) can be meaningfully linked to the analysis of specific sociological issues in sport. It would be useful for the same reasons to perform a systematic review of the following: contributions to mainstream sociological journals written from a Christian perspective; the contents of the mid-20th century journal *Christendom*; and, contributions to the publications emanating from the Association of Christians Teaching Sociology (ACTS) and the Christian Sociological Society (CSS), the most recent being the *Journal for the Sociological Integration of Religion and Society*. Third, the sociological theology that has been developed from the 1970s would be worth analysing with sociological issues inherent in sport in mind.

Finally, I am certain that this essay has not recognised all of the pockets of Christian approaches to sociology that may be available for sports sociologists to investigate. I hope that those interested in challenging the secular dominance will join me in attempting to uncover further key areas and begin the exciting process of discovery in an attempt to ensure the voices of Christian sociologists are heard and no longer ignored within the sociology of sport.

Postscript

The Christian and sociological parts of my thinking continue to glare at each other from opposite corners of my mind (Perkins, 1987: 10).

I felt it important to provide the reader with the epistemological roots of my argument and thinking employed in what I have presented above, hence the following personal reflections which acts to contextualise my Christian faith with my sociological imagination.

I studied for my undergraduate degree in sports studies and my Master's degree in the sociology of sport as a non-Christian in what are secular universities - De Montfort University (Bedford, UK – now the University of Bedfordshire) for the undergraduate degree and The University of Leicester (UK) for the Masters. At Leicester I was based in what was the 'Centre for Research into Sport & Society' (CRSS) and I was taught the 'figurational' approach to sociology (and sport) originally established at Leicester by the German social theorist Norbert Elias. As part of this sociological training I was taught to take what Elias (1987: 6) termed a "detour via detachment" and to attempt to make, as far as possible, 'value-free' rather than 'value-laden' judgements as a social scientist. I was taught to recognise that although complete objectivity is impossible in social scientific investigations where a degree of subjective involvement with the subject matter is unavoidable and usually necessary, it is essential to also take 'degrees of detachment' from the object of study in order to avoid clouding one's judgement in conducting valid and reliable research. I later went on to complete a PhD whilst working as a full-time lecturer at Teesside University (UK) and engaged my figurational sociological training in a study into the relationship between English national identity and football fan culture, which was later published as a book (Gibbons, 2014).

Much to the surprise of my family, friends and work colleagues, I became a Christian in 2008 whilst studying for my PhD. Although this decision was nothing to do with the

subject matter of my studies, my sociologically programmed mind significantly delayed my decision to come to faith in Christ. The decision process manifested as an internal dialogue between the sociologist in me on one side encouraging me to take a ‘detour via detachment’ in considering whether Jesus was real, and on the other, a “still, small voice” (1 Kings 19:12) beckoning me to trust in Jesus Christ. This decision-making process began when I attended an evangelical Gospel crusade in a large marquee erected in a park in Teesside in the summer of 2008. A Christian colleague of mine had invited me to a number of events before and in the past I had always declined, but this time I went along as I had ran out of excuses! After six weeks of attending weekly meetings on Wednesday evenings and thinking seriously about whether it was even possible for a sociologist to have faith, I eventually concluded that I had no good reason not to give following Jesus Christ a try. No one was more surprised than me at my conversion and seven years on I am still discovering the ways in which my decision to follow Christ has impacted upon my professional occupation as a sociologist of sport.

Becoming a Christian and growing in faith in Jesus Christ has definitely altered my identity as well as what sociologists refer to as my ‘habitus’. The term ‘habitus’ is closely related to the word ‘identity’ although it’s meaning is more complex. Habitus refers to a kind of second nature or internal steering mechanism, a specific set of acquired dispositions of thought, behaviour and actions that are embedded in individuals through socialisation into particular cultures. Mennell (1994: 177) refers to habitus as

...closely related to the notion of *identity*. The difference is perhaps that “identity” implies a higher level of conscious awareness by members of a group, some degree of reflection and articulation, some positive or negative emotional feelings towards the

characteristics which members of a group perceive themselves as sharing and in which they perceive themselves as differing from other groups.⁶

Elias uses the phrase ‘social habitus’ which he contends exists within the personality structure of every individual human being (cf. Elias, 1978; 1991; 1996; Elias and Scotson, 1994). Hence I now consider my identity and social habitus to be Christian and whilst I would still regard myself as a sociologist of sport, I have yet to fully explore the internal juxtaposition between being a Christian and a sports sociologist.

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⁶ Although habitus is a term thought to have originated in the work of Aristotle, Bourdieu (cf. 1977) is most commonly associated with its modern usage in sociology (Scott and Marshall, 2009: 299). Yet it is important to clarify that the term ‘habitus’ was actually used in a sociological context prior to this by Elias (1939/2000) in *The Civilizing Process* which was originally published in German in 1939 as two separate volumes, *The History of Manners* and *State Formation and Civilization*. English translations of the separate volumes were not published until 1978 and 1982 respectively. Both volumes were eventually published together in English in 1994. The revised edition (2000) of the 1994 version is the text referred to here.

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ChallengeThe main challenge, I think, to sociological theory or to social theory more broadly remains that of bridging the gap between what C. Wright Mills (1959), nearly sixty years ago, called "grand theory" and "abstracted empiricism". Over two hundred years ago, Kant (1781) formulated a similar conception, that "thoughts without content are empty and perceptions without concepts are blind" (Gedanken ohne Inhalt sind leer, Anschauungen ohne Begriffe sind blind.) In turn it transformed the rest of sociology. Sociologists of deviance read and absorbed Foucault; sociologists of politics or sport read Gramsci, Althusser or Norbert Elias. What Elias (1987) had himself criticised as the "withdrawal of sociologists into the present"