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Postures of Piety and Protest: American Civil Religion and the Politics of Kneeling in the NFL

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Abstract: Over the past ten years, athletes Tim Tebow and Colin Kaepernick have become famous for kneeling on the NFL football field. However, public reactions to these gestures varied significantly: Tebow's kneeling spawned a lightly mocking but overall flattering meme, while Kaepernick's stoked public controversy and derailed his NFL career. In order to interrogate these divergent responses, this article places the work of sociologist Robert Bellah and philosopher Michel Foucault in dialogue. It argues that spectator sports are a crucial space for the negotiation and contestation of American identity, or, in Bellah's terms, civil religion. It then draws on philosopher Michel Foucault's concept of the docile body to explore the rationales behind and cultural reactions to the kneeling posture. I argue that Tebow and Kaepernick advance divergent civil religious visions within the "politics of the sacred" being negotiated in American life. In this process of negotiation, American football emerges as both a space for the public cultivation of docile bodies and a crucial forum for reassessing American values and practices.

Keywords: civil religion; NFL; docile bodies; panopticon; Tim Tebow; Colin Kaepernick; Husain Abdullah; Robert Bellah; Michel Foucault; Barack Obama; Donald Trump

1. Introduction

In September 2018, a distinctly capitalist form of iconoclasm went viral. Images of Nike gear in flames proliferated on social media as irate consumers reacted to the brand's decision to make former NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick the face of their "Dream Crazy" ad campaign. Kaepernick rose to fame—and infamy—for kneeling in protest during the American national anthem. Nike's sales surged in the wake of the outcry. Iconoclasm, it turns out, is good publicity.

This invites comparison with another viral NFL kneeling incident. On 23 October 2011, quarterback Tim Tebow led the Denver Broncos to a thrilling come-from-behind victory over the Miami Dolphins. As his teammates celebrated, the cameras caught the outspoken evangelical Christian kneeling in prayer, seemingly oblivious to the commotion around him. Broncos fan Jared Kleinstein posted a photo mimicking Tebow's pose on social media. Within days, "Tebowing"—i.e., "to get down on one knee and start praying, even if everyone else around you is doing something completely different"—became a cultural phenomenon. By year's end, Kleinstein's blog had logged 20 million views and received 20,000 submissions of people replicating the pose at Hollywood red carpet events, famous landmarks, and other public spaces (Stoll 2012). Tebow's signature kneel had become an iconic meme.

That a gesture on an NFL football field would emerge as a cultural touchstone is simultaneously predictable and surprising. Athletes regularly use their platform to address broader social concerns, underscoring the fact that spectator sports broker major cultural conversations in ways that our churches and civic organizations do not. America's fraught racial history contextualizes why a black athlete and white athlete performing the same gesture have elicited markedly different reactions. Even so, the fact that a single, widely performed posture of prayer is capable of triggering both icon making and iconoclasm on a mass scale warrants closer examination.

This paper examines what the kneeling gesture and reactions to it signal about America's civil religious rituals, practices, and the values that they reflect and enforce. To explore spectator sports' central role in negotiating and contesting American identity, I turn to sociologist Robert Bellah's notion of civil religion and Anthony Squiers's concept of the "politics of the sacred." I use philosopher Michel Foucault's concept of the docile body to examine how Tebow, Kaepernick, and Muslim NFL player Husain Abdullah deployed the kneeling gesture and to make sense of how both the league and the broader public responded. I introduce the concept of docile religiosity to shed light on how public figures like Tebow and Kaepernick determine when to introduce distinctly religious gestures into the civil sphere and to clarify how these gestures intervene in America's "politics of the sacred." I conclude by reflecting on what these kneeling incidents reveal about the religious functions of spectator sports and the political power of religious display in contemporary America.

2. Sports as Civil Religion

The religious overtones of American football are well documented. In the pages of *Sports Illustrated* in 1976, Frank Dedford coined the term "sportianity" to describe the symbiotic relationship between the NFL and evangelical Christian organizations (Blazer 2012, p.293). He noted wryly, "Sport owns Sunday now, and religion is content to lease a few minutes before the games" (Dedford 1976a, p. 103). In the mid-1980s, Joseph Price described the Super Bowl as a religious festival that reinforced the contradictory centrality of both violence and innocence in American self-conception (Price 2001). More recently, Michael Butterworth analyzed the civil religious subtext to the opening montage to Fox's broadcast of the 2008 Super Bowl. Against the backdrop of the War on Terror, it incorporated nationalistic imagery—"ink and quill moving across parchment paper, colonial architecture, bald eagles, and of course, waving American flags"—with a litany of NFL greats reciting excerpts from the Declaration of Independence (Butterworth 2008, p. 318). For Price and Butterworth, the Super Bowl is pivotal to American civil religion. To state their case, they each draw on Robert Bellah's seminal work on civil religion in America.

Bellah (Bellah [1967] 2005) argued that, in the absence of a national church, America still needed a group identity rooted in a shared set of traditions and values. Cultivating this identity required civic displays and observances that collectively supplied a "religious dimension for the whole fabric of American life." Bellah borrows the term "civil religion" from Rousseau, defining it as the "set of beliefs, symbols and rituals" that make up this "public religious dimension." Over time, this public religious dimension has developed such that there now "exists alongside of and rather clearly differentiated from the churches an elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion in America" (p. 42).

Like any full-fledged religious tradition, American civil religion "has its own prophets and its own martyrs, its own sacred events and sacred places, its own solemn rituals and symbols" (Bellah [1967] 2005, p. 54). National holidays are its liturgical calendar, commemorating the birth of the body politic (Independence Day), paying homage to great political leaders (Presidents' Day), marking key dates in military history (Pearl Harbor Day, D-Day), and memorializing those who have sacrificed for the nation (Veterans Day, Memorial Day). Observing this calendar requires a battery of civic rituals, from flag ceremonies, to assemblies, to speeches.

The notion of civil religion has shaped numerous attempts to understand the role of sports in contemporary society. Craig Forney (2007) argues that the spectator sports of football, basketball, and baseball serve as key staging grounds for American civil religious ritual. Arthur Remillard examines how athletic venues function as "sacred space" in which ritual performances create, enforce, and contest a worldview. "The world of sports," Remillard writes, "has its own, unique moral geography where events, symbols, and structures are subject to figurative tug-of-wars between competing interests" (Remillard 2015, p. 2888). Elements of this worldview may be particular to a region or a fan base. A good rivalry game, for instance, showcases the competing value systems of distinct sports cultures, such as urban versus rural, blue collar versus elite or northern versus southern. Yet these same contests

also exhibit values that transcend rivalry, such as commitment to fair play, respect for hard work, and honoring military personnel.

If civil religion depicts national ideals, spectator sports and their stadiums provide a platform from which to broadcast them. Yet they also reveal the dynamic, contested nature of civil religion. [Squiers \(2018, p. 8\)](#) argues that American civil religion “serves as a form by which Americans talk about and subsequently make sense of their nation, its moral state and its place in the world.” As part of the process of adapting to a changing world, aspects of civil religion are continually negotiated and contested. Consequently, divergent civil religious visions are constantly competing in American life. While these visions share common symbols (such as the American flag) and rituals (such as the national anthem), they can disagree sharply on the values these symbols and rituals represent and thus, what their function ought to be. Disagreements crystalize around what Squiers calls the “politics of the sacred,” which he defines as a “battle to define what can and cannot be and what should and should not be tolerated and accepted in the community, based on that which is sacred for that community” ([Squiers 2018, p. 20](#)).

As the NFL kneeling controversies illustrate, athletic competition provides a platform for contesting the “politics of the sacred.” And athletes have leveraged this platform, to culture-transforming effect. As David Steele observes, “The history of America cannot be told without Jack Johnson. Jesse Owens. Paul Robeson. Joe Louis. Jackie Robinson. Muhammad Ali. Tommie Smith and John Carlos. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar” ([Steele 2019](#)). Women’s sports have their own history-shaping litany: Rose Robinson. Kathryn Switzer. Althea Gibson. Billie Jean King. Toni Smith. Serena Williams. Their strategies have varied: Owens and King used sheer athletic dominance to discredit racism and sexism. Muhammad Ali used oratory to critique the Vietnam War. Still others have used a bodily posture, such as Tommie Smith and John Carlos raising their fists in the Black Power symbol during the medal ceremony at the 1968 Olympics.

Smith and Carlos’s gesture touched a nerve. Though lionized today as a key moment in the history of black civil rights activism, it initially elicited violent backlash, from sportscaster Brett Musburger’s vicious editorial describing Smith and Carlos as “black-skinned storm troopers” engaging in a “juvenile gesture” to a stream of death threats ([Zirin 2012](#)). The sheer strength of reaction attests to the anthem ritual’s place in Americans’ ongoing “politics of the sacred:” do America’s most sacred values transcend the anthem ritual—in which case the ritual can and sometimes *ought* to be contested? Or is the anthem ritual itself sacred, and thus, sacrosanct? To understand how a simple posture during the anthem becomes a means of enforcing or contesting a particular civil religious vision, we will turn to Michel Foucault’s analysis of docile bodies. But first, a few words on the historical and contemporary place of the anthem in American sports.

3. Star Spangled Stadiums

The anthem was first sung at a professional sporting event during the 1918 World Series, as U.S. troops fought in the First World War ([Remillard 2016](#)). In short order it became a staple of the ballgame experience. In recent decades, however, NFL football has staged the showiest forms of patriotism around the anthem, from enormous flags that span the entire field, to military flyovers, to the “Pro Football and the American Spirit” exhibit at the NFL Hall of Fame ([Butterworth 2012](#)). The NFL’s financial ties to the Pentagon have drawn congressional scrutiny. A 2015 joint oversight report sponsored by senators John McCain and Jeff Flake found that the Pentagon had spent millions in taxpayer dollars on color guards, surprise homecomings, events honoring wounded warriors, and other such activities at sports venues. Although all five major American sports leagues were implicated, the report singled out the NFL as the most serious offender. The prologue describes the problem with “paid patriotism:”

Unsuspecting audience members became the subjects of paid-marketing campaigns rather than simply bearing witness to teams’ authentic, voluntary shows of support for the brave men and women who wear our nation’s uniform. This not only betrays the sentiment and

trust of fans, but casts an unfortunate shadow over the genuine patriotic partnerships that do so much for our troops. (McCain and Flake 2015)

The Pentagon's alignment with professional sports highlights their usefulness as platforms for patriotic appeals. Its close ties to the NFL in particular points to deep compatibility between their respective institutional cultures. The qualities of a good football player—the capacity for explosive yet controlled aggression, habitual deference to authority, the ability to coordinate with others and willingness to sacrifice one's body for the good of the whole—happen to be the qualities of a good soldier. In addition, the game day ritual's emphasis on visible displays of national pride—standing during the anthem, gasping in awe at a flyover, or clapping for men and women in uniform—reinforces patriotic sentiment. As part of what Samantha King calls the “militarization of everyday life,” paid patriotism is worth every penny (King 2014, p. 192).

How these displays are perceived among spectators, however, can vary considerably. In an analysis of 30 years' worth of survey data, Sorek and White (2016) discovered that the game's effect on patriotic sentiment differed by race: whereas white NFL fans were more likely than white non-fans to identify as “very” or “extremely” proud of being American, black NFL fans were *less* likely than black non-fans to report high rates of patriotic sentiment. While the authors argue that more work needs to be done on *why* this difference exists,¹ they do note that “black fans may experience a very different game” than their white counterparts (Sorek and White 2016, p. 274). Racial disparities in perceptions of Kaepernick's anthem protest and what it means further confirms this intuition (Casteel 2017). As we shall see, Tebow's and Kaepernick's accounts of when and why they kneeled suggest that these disparities are rooted in divergent civil religious visions, with contrasting accounts of what Americans ought to regard as sacred and what they ought to contest.

Noting the importance of civil religion and the prominence of football as its staging ground supplies context for unpacking the kneeling controversies. Yet various questions remain. Of all game day rituals, why is the *anthem* such a hotly contested moment? Of all bodily gestures, why does *kneeling* elicit such strong reactions? Further, how do the characteristics of those involved—that Tebow is a white evangelical Christian, Kaepernick is a black Christian protesting police brutality, or Abdullah is a practicing Muslim—shape the cultural conversation around their gestures? For a theoretical framework to address these questions, I turn to the work of French social theorist Michel Foucault.

4. Foucault on Docile Bodies

At first glance, applying the concept of docility to our most violent national sport might seem strange. For Foucault, however, docility was essential to organized activity no matter how physically demanding. Farmers might describe a good workhorse as docile because its energies are easily channeled into productive forms of labor, such as plowing a field or transporting goods. A docile horse accustomed to bit and bridle is vastly more useful on a working farm than its unbroken counterpart. For Foucault, the same was true of human beings. If division of labor made the emergence of civilization possible, its sophisticated modern forms depended on synchronizing and channeling this labor, whether on the factory floor, in the boardroom, or on the field of battle. And docile bodies are far more easily synchronized than non-docile bodies.

On Foucault's telling, dramatic improvements to the process of producing docile bodies made the Industrial Revolution possible. The sports that grew out of the American industrial context reflect and reinforce this process, arguably none more so than football (Oates 2004, pp. 103–20). But first, a run-down of Foucault's theory:

¹ Sorek and White hypothesize that, for black NFL fans, the majority-black league represents a functioning meritocracy that contrasts with their experience of American society more broadly. If so, lower rates of patriotic sentiment may be a product of “rejecting the popular discourse that links football to a wider ethnically blind meritocratic character of America” (p. 274).

(Foucault [1977] 1995) discerns a paradigm shift in how power operated in 17th and 18th century Europe from *punishment* to *discipline*. Up through the 17th century, European rulers relied on corporal punishment to impose order. Its deployment, however, required a deft touch. Overuse might earn the ruler a reputation for brutality, and underuse a reputation for weakness. Either scenario could prompt subjects to revolt. Punishment, in short, carried inherent risk.

The 18th century ushered in discipline as the primary mode of social control. This shift took concrete form in English philosopher Jeremy Bentham's panopticon design for prisons. If prisons were built with all cells facing a central watchtower, inmates could be monitored with ease. Bentham further suggested placing blinds on the watchtower windows, rendering the watchers invisible to the inmates. Not knowing whether the watchtower had eyes on them at any *particular* moment incentivized inmates to behave as if they were being watched at *all* moments.

The effects of panoptic design were far-reaching. The Medieval dungeon constrained the body without seeking to reform the individual. The surveillance apparatus of the panopticon, however, was built to do both. Knowing that they *could* be observed at any moment prompted inmates to conform their conduct to the jailer's wishes. The central watchtower thus became a tool for inculcating socially useful behaviors in the prisoners, transforming the prison into a site for rendering undisciplined bodies docile and useful to the state. A simple architectural innovation held radical implications for social reform. As (Foucault [1977] 1995) put it, "stones can make people docile and knowable" (p. 172).

Panoptic surveillance techniques triggered massive changes. As populations grew and economies diversified, societies developed finely honed mechanisms for coordinating human movement at both macro and micro levels. It was during the nineteenth centuries, for instance, that entire nations began to adopt standardized time measures as train stations, factory floors, and other sites of industrial economic activity came to depend on a populace that would perform its given tasks at the appointed time, place, and manner. Industrial societies, in other words, required docile bodies on a mass scale. The governments that most excelled at cultivating a docile citizenry would be best positioned to harness and direct labor toward economically and politically productive ends.

Such large-scale social engineering required the minute attention to detail that panoptic techniques made possible. We see this today in the elaborate and interconnected network of schools, hospitals, correctional facilities, and workplaces that habituate us to observation, evaluation, and direction. Our teachers, bosses, colleagues, or in our contemporary moment, the faceless entities that access our smartphones and search histories, create the near-constant possibility of surveillance. Like the inmates in Bentham's model prison, we respond by internalizing the behaviors expected of us. Self-policing becomes second nature as we are rendered docile.

Team Sports and the Exemplary Docile Body

As Foucault argues, the ease with which docile bodies can be mobilized and synchronized increases society's capacity to exert power. By way of illustration, consider ideal soldiers. Not only are they in peak physical shape, they are also adept at coordinating with fellow soldiers and obeying the chain of command. Following orders reflexively and precisely enables them synchronize with others while carrying out complex military maneuvers. In this regard, the well-trained soldier exemplifies a body that is "docile in its minutest operations" (Foucault [1977] 1995, p. 156).

Team sports follow similar principles. While raw talent helps individual players stand out, coordinating with others is key to high-level success. As (Dedford 1976b) notes, "A game is played in an artificial atmosphere in which rules have been made, goals established, and everybody does the same thing. In effect, you win by conforming better than anyone else" (p. 69). At the professional ranks, the training regimens that maximize on-field coordination can become totalizing. Luke Jones and Jim Denison chronicle how the highly structured environment of professional soccer in the U.K. produces "docile footballing bodies" without cultivating the self-directive skills necessary to function outside of the team's disciplinary apparatus (Jones and Denison 2017, p. 924). Consequently, newly retired athletes struggle with basic activities such as paying bills or finding a job. As one player described the

experience: “It left me stuck in a rut. I thought . . . what do I do with the rest of my days? Literally what am I going to do? There was quite a big phase where I had no focus. Not through want, but because I had nothing to focus on. I had no-one telling me what I needed to do next (Jones and Denison 2017, p. 933).” Jones and Denison’s analysis suggests that former players face alarming rates of incarceration in part because they have lost the ability to structure their own lives. This is not unlike the accounts of soldiers who struggle to adjust to civilian existence once they leave the highly regimented confines of the military. Both cases illustrate the potentially pervasive effects of disciplines designed to produce docile bodies.

The exemplary docile body is not passive. It is strong, agile, skilled, and under the complete control of authority structures that synchronize its energies with those of other bodies. American football hones these traits to an exceptional degree—bodies capable of astonishing feats of athleticism and endurance; of unleashing violent energy at the instant that the clock starts and in the precise modes that the rules dictate; of reining in that energy as soon as the ball is thrown or the whistle blows. The NFL offers the most high profile showcase of the exemplary docile body that American culture has to offer. This makes it a natural partner for the military—and as Bellah helps us understand, an ideal staging ground for patriotic display.

5. Panoptic Spectacle

Bellah’s analysis of civil religion and Foucault’s account of docile bodies may at first seem to be an odd conceptual coupling. Civil religious ritual forges a body politic by strategically deploying national symbols in public forums. For this to work, there must be a performance that draws large crowds of people. Civil religion, in short, relies on spectacle. For Foucault, however, panoptic disciplines displace spectacle: “Modern society,” he argues, “is not one of spectacle, but of surveillance” in which “relations can be regulated only in a form that is the exact opposite of spectacle.” Surveillance techniques render social mechanisms of control virtually invisible, shaping a docile citizenry by operating unobtrusively in the background of everyday life. Precisely because of their subtlety, panoptic methods manage the body politic more effectively than spectacle, with its reliance on ostentatious visibility. Thus, he concludes, “we are neither in the amphitheatre, nor on the stage, but in the panoptic machine” (Foucault [1977] 1995, p. 217). Yet the sheer popularity of spectator sports suggests a prominent and ongoing role for spectacle within the panoptic machine. The amphitheater and stage may no longer draw throngs, but the arena features as prominently today as in any historical milieu, panoptic or otherwise. Though surveillance techniques have altered spectacle, its social function remains as vital as ever.

Foucault’s dismissal of spectacle reveals the limitations of his method. His work exposes the granular, pervasive character of surveillance-based techniques of social control—what he evocatively calls the “micro-physics of power” (Foucault [1977] 1995, p. 26). He perceptively argues that modern penal systems no longer rely on the ability to transform corporal punishment into public spectacle as a means of exerting power. However, no matter how subtle and unobtrusive the means of making them docile become, the fact remains that, humans are social beings who derive their identity from the group and rely on visible means of affirming group belonging. As the trailblazing sociologist Émile Durkheim understood, individuals need origin stories, symbols, and rituals to enforce their connection to the clan—or as subsequent scholarship has argued, to team and nation (Riley 2014; Serazio 2013).

For Durkheim, collective identity finds concrete expression in a totem, i.e., an object such as an emblem or a flag that represents the group (Riley 2014, p. 724). Totems are displayed prominently at public gatherings where individuals get caught up in the electric feel of the crowd—what Durkheim called “collective effervescence.”² The stronger the link that the individual draws between the totem

² As Durkheim put it, the proximity of people in a crowd generates a “kind of electricity that transports them to an extraordinary degree of exaltation” (Durkheim 2001, p. 162).

and the experience of effervescence, the more power the totem has to galvanize the group. Totemic symbols such as team logos or national flags thus become instrumental to assembling the social body and channeling its energies. Even in panoptic settings, totems and their attendant civil religious rituals prove immensely useful to synchronizing bodies.

Foucauldian analysis can also overlook the perennial political import of spectacle's visceral appeal. In the *Confessions*, the 4th century author [Augustine \(1991\)](#) relates the story of Alypius, who attended the Roman coliseum games thinking he had the willpower to resist being enticed by the carnage:

When they arrived and found seats where they could, the entire place seethed with the most monstrous delight in the cruelty. [Alypius] kept his eyes shut . . . would that he had blocked his ears as well! A man fell in combat. A great roar from the entire crowd struck him with such vehemence that he was overcome by curiosity. The shouting entered through his ears and forced open his eyes . . . As soon as he saw the blood he at once drank in the savagery and did not turn away. His eyes were riveted (6.8.13).

The NFL's unmatched capacity to pack stadiums and draw viewers—in 2018, for instance, the four most-watched telecasts in America were NFL games—attests to how effectively it has harnessed the riveting power of spectacle ([Levin 2018](#)). It does not glorify wanton bloodshed the way that the coliseum did—panoptic societies do not tolerate such chaotic outbursts. Instead, NFL film crews offer up tightly scripted violence—"montages of violent collisions and the close-ups of bloodied fists and contorted faces spraying sweat drops in super slow motion"—for voyeuristic mass consumption ([Oriard 2007](#), p. 18). Though the form of spectacle has changed, viewers are no less enthralled.

The NFL thus produces a spectacle for the panoptic age. At its heart is the coordinated, disciplined, productive violence of the exemplary docile body. The vast audience the spectacle commands positions the league to stage civil religious rituals that channel the raw emotions that violence elicits, such as rage, exuberance, and bloodlust, into the productive outlets of patriotism, reverence for sacrifice, and a sense of belonging. This melding of a spectacle and civil religion equips the NFL to rally a vast audience characterized by regional team allegiances around the totemic national symbol of stars and stripes, thereby forging the many into one.

The very infrastructure that enables surveillance can be used to broadcast a single event to billions. In this way, the technologies Foucault thought had displaced spectacle have actually extended its power to synchronize the masses. Yet even in a panoptic age, spectacle carries political risk. A single act of defiance can transform the gladiator, the entertainer, the model citizen, into a martyr, a voice of conscience, a symbol of resistance. This places immense pressure on those who stage the spectacle to follow the script. The consequences of diverting can be steep, as the NFL kneeling incidents illustrate.

6. The NFL on Its Knees

On 29 September 2014, Kansas City Chiefs defensive back Husain Abdullah intercepted legendary New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady for a touchdown. On reaching the end zone, he dropped to his knees and bowed in an act of prayerful prostration. The referee threw a flag for excessive celebration. Abdullah was assessed a 15-yard penalty for unsportsmanlike conduct—the same penalty assigned for grabbing a player's facemask, unnecessary roughness, or other physically dangerous infractions. The following day, the NFL's vice-president of communications clarified that the flag had been a mistake: while sliding to the ground is punishable as excessive celebration, performing a religious gesture was not ([Bien 2014](#)). The referee had mistaken the two.

This explanation is puzzling. For one, it presumes a clean distinction between religious and celebratory gestures that is undercut every time a player kneels in celebration. Furthermore, that referees failed to recognize Muslim prostration—among the most common public religious gestures on earth—reveals how proscribed the NFL's views of what qualifies as religious display can be. Referees have long treated dropping to one knee after scoring a touchdown as a religious posture; two knees,

however, crossed over into excessive celebration. Why did they assign such different meanings to such similar gestures?

As arbitrary as these policies might seem initially, Foucault's analysis of docile bodies uncovers a consistent underlying logic. Though two knees on the ground and a tackle after play is stopped differ markedly in form, they deviate similarly from the regimes of bodily discipline the league imposes on its players. That slight shifts in prayer gesture can draw penalty flags in the same way as minute changes to tackling technique suggests that the league polices religious display as stringently as any other on-field act. To evade penalty, religious postures must occur at the right time and place and in the right way. In the NFL, religious bodies must be docile bodies.

The NFL's response to Abdullah reflects broader cultural mores around public religious display. One knee on the ground conforms to evangelical Protestant forms of religious expression associated with respect for authority, patriotism, and other traits of the good citizen (Fessenden 2007, pp. 60–83).³ Consequently, it satisfies civil religious metrics for docility that make it safe to condone. Two knees on the ground can characterize non-Protestant or even non-Christian modes of expression, given its similarity to kneeling during a Catholic mass or prostrating during an Islamic prayer. Such ambiguity leaves the athlete vulnerable to the charge of disregarding the scripted performance of the docile body, and thus, of the good citizen.

In the eyes of the league, the form of Husain Abdullah's gesture deviated from docile religious expression. The same cannot be said of Colin Kaepernick, whose single-knee gesture adheres as closely to proper form as Tim Tebow's did, and yet, while Tebow's gesture ultimately burnished his squeaky-clean image, Kaepernick's made him the most divisive athlete in America. Again, the notion of docile bodies helps us understand why.

In Sync/Out of Sync

The ritual beats of NFL game day pageantry extend well beyond the field of play. From the moment they set foot in the stadium, athletes and coaches must dress, talk, and behave in highly proscribed ways. Fans are expected to know when to stand, sit, cheer, jeer, or be silent. The game day spectacle assigns a role to everyone. Only once during the proceedings do all these roles synchronize: at the singing of the anthem, when all salute the flag.

Panoptic disciplines are designed to facilitate synchrony. When people perform their assigned task at the right time and place and in the right way, they perform docility, and docile bodies can be organized and directed as society's leaders see fit. The anthem is many things: a unifying ritual, a show of patriotism, a means of honoring the armed forces, but it is also a test of how readily the body politic can be synchronized, and thus, of how docile its component parts are. Eighty thousand people standing at attention is a stunning tribute to the synchronizing power of a national symbol. As exemplars of docility whose synchronized posture is broadcast to the masses, the players are scrutinized particularly closely.

This scrutiny was on full display when Colin Kaepernick chose to kneel during the anthem. He sat at first, solitary and unnoticed through two preseason games of 2016. Not until the third game did he get asked why: "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color. To me, this is bigger than football." He later clarified, "When there's significant change and I feel that flag represents what it's supposed to represent, and this country is representing people the way that it's supposed to, I'll stand" (Sandritter 2017). His participation in the anthem ritual, in other words, was conditional on American society upholding a set of transcendent sacred values. Several days later, Kaepernick met with fellow player and former Green Beret Nate Boyer, who had penned an open letter expressing why he found sitting during the anthem offensive (Boyer 2016).

³ Fessenden argues that Protestantism set the terms for what constituted good citizenship for other religious and ethnic groups that came to America.

In that meeting, Boyer pointed out that kneeling replicated the gesture that soldiers used to honor a fallen comrade, demonstrating respect for those who served in the military (Brinson 2016). Kaepernick took Boyer's advice to heart. He kneeled during the following game's anthem, catapulting him to national consciousness as athletes, celebrities, and politicians took notice. Taking a knee hit a nerve that sitting on a bench did not. Why?

In Foucauldian terms, sitting and kneeling alike break anthem protocol at the precise moment when everyone is expected to synchronize. Thus, they both register as protest. For Boyer, the key difference between them boiled down to which gesture communicated respect toward the military. Yet this overlooked the fact that the league recognizes taking a knee as a *religious* act. By incorporating this gesture into his protest, Kaepernick undermined the carefully orchestrated place of religion in NFL spectacle. In so doing, he illustrated the power of religious display to either sanction or upend the NFL's staging of civil religion.

To grasp the full impact of Kaepernick's protest, we must be clear on the role religious display is permitted to play in American sports. For this we turn to Tim Tebow who, though outspoken about his faith, adheres meticulously to cultural mores around religious display. As Tebow put it when asked about Kaepernick, "When people have belief in something, or a conviction in something, trying to stand for that is a good thing. It's all about standing for it the right way" (Nightengale 2016). Understanding what constitutes the "right" way for Tebow discloses what the civil religion on display in the NFL and in American sports more broadly regards as sacred.

Throughout his athletic career, Tebow took care to kneel at the right times and places: on the sideline immediately before the game, on the field after the final whistle, in the opponent's end zone following a touchdown. He had used the gesture since high school to "thank my Lord and savior Jesus Christ and also put things in perspective" (Peter 2018). He also knelt in the right way: one knee down, signaling religious intent; head bowed, marking a private moment of prayer; arm flexed as it rests on his helmet, displaying the impressive musculature of a rigorously disciplined body. This one gesture, performed at the right time and places, fused social norms of masculinity, docility, and evangelical Christian piety in a manner that resonated, like Tebow himself, with the predominant civil religious sensibilities of American culture.

In his college years, Tebow was an exemplar of both evangelical Christian piety and athletic excellence. He burnished his evangelical bona fides by leading bible studies and cultivating a reputation for practicing what he preached. When he took the field for the 2009 college championship game with John 3:16 on his eye black, Google reported 90 million searches for the verse (Tenety 2012). As an athlete, his leadership skills were famously exhibited following a home loss in September 2008. In a statement now enshrined on a stadium plaque, Tebow shouldered the blame for the loss and promised that no team in the country would play harder the remainder of the season. The Gators went on to win the national championship. Tebow's teammates could not help but be impressed. As linebacker Brandon Spikes put it, "He just said it and we got it done. He was a prophet" (Associated Press 2009).

Prophet or not, Tebow struggled throughout his time at the University of Florida (2006–2009) to translate on-field leadership into moral influence in the locker room. Gators football became mired in scandal under head coach Urban Meyer, with over 30 football players arrested between 2005 and 2010 (Fowler and George 2010). How does a team with the most famous Christian athlete in America at the helm become so notoriously troubled?⁴ The simplest answer may be that Tebow's teammates simply did not see their team leader's on-field piety as having off-field implications. In true evangelical fashion, Tebow intended his on-field religious displays to underscore the importance of a vibrant personal faith: "It was never something I did to take away from somebody else. It was just something

⁴ Primary responsibility for team culture lies with the head coach. After Urban Meyer's successor Will Muschamp kicked him off the team for marijuana possession, cornerback Janoris Jenkins stated, "If Coach Meyer were still coaching, I'd still be playing for the Gators. Coach Meyer knows what it takes to win" (Bianchi 2011). Like Tebow, Meyer is an outspoken evangelical Christian.

I did with my personal relationship with my God” (Peter 2018). Yet these displays served a double function. Performed in the right way, at sanctioned times and places, they imparted an aura of sanctity to the team’s athletic exploits. Linking on-field success to divine favor absolved those who won on the field of their shortcomings off of it. However earnestly Tebow believed in the importance of personal spiritual transformation, his on-field piety adhered to a script that extolled the sanctifying power, not of repentance, but of victory. It appears that his teammates got the message.⁵ And it was the prevailing message of the Tebowmania to come.

By design, religious display that takes the right form, at the right times, and in the right places sanctions the status quo. The NFL permits athletes to kneel in prayer after scoring a touchdown or thank Jesus Christ on camera once they have won the game, not to safeguard religious expression, but because religious gestures at these junctures elevates winning athletic competitions to sacred status (Krattenmaker 2010, pp. 69–75). This, in turn, enhances the prestige of the league. In a system where player behavior is regulated so carefully, athletes cannot shift the cultural conversation by following the rules. On-field gestures can only effect change by breaking protocol in a manner that challenges the prevailing civil religious narrative underpinning cultural self-understanding.

Tebow and Kaepernick’s kneeling postures differ only in their timing. This seemingly subtle distinction has drastically altered their impact. One spurred viral emulation; the other, viral destruction. One is an icon of docile religiosity; the other, a symbol of protest. I now examine each in detail.

7. Sideline Kneels and the Sacred

In 2011, Denver Broncos fan Jared Kleinstein and his friends noticed Tebow kneeling on the sideline after leading a game-winning drive. They replicated the pose, not out of piety (Kleinstein is Jewish), but as a tongue-in-cheek form of homage. Kleinstein posted the image to social media, and just like that, Tebowmania was born (Maske 2011).

Tebow was ideally positioned to become a cultural phenomenon. Though new to the NFL, he arrived with a national profile thanks to his college exploits. He had also just orchestrated an improbable series of drives to win the game. He was the right person (the winning quarterback) at the right moment (once the game was over) to engage in religious display, and by getting down on one knee, he chose the NFL’s favorite form of humble brag –using a marker of religious humility to celebrate exceptional play. This was a gesture in sync with league and cultural expectations. This is not to suggest that Tebow’s gesture was without controversy. Various media figures criticized the public nature of his religious display and debated its propriety (Bishop 2011; Engel 2011; Jenkins 2011; Tures 2015). Notably lacking, however, are criticisms of a *civil* religious nature, calling into question his patriotism or gratitude for the troops. The fact remains that Tebow’s gesture aligned with predominant cultural sensibilities such that he attained folk hero status well out of proportion to his on-field accomplishments. As Dave Zirin put it, Tebow is the “only NFL player who can be described as having a base” (Zirin 2013).

The timing of Tebow’s postgame kneel contrasts markedly with Kaepernick’s anthem kneel. The flag fulfills the totemic function of invoking a shared American identity, prompting individuals divided in everyday life by sport allegiances, political and religious affiliations, and markers of gender, race, and class to stand simultaneously. This reinforces the mystique of America: its values, rituals, and overwhelming political and symbolic power made visible in a synchronized citizenry.

Where Tebow’s kneel upheld this mystique, Kaepernick’s kneel punctured it. By taking a knee when everyone was supposed to stand for the anthem, he registered his insistence that sacred American values be enacted before national symbols are celebrated. In no land of the free, he asserted, do law enforcement officials inflict violence on black and brown bodies with impunity. In no home of the brave do the masses remain silent in the face of brazen injustice. In Kaepernick’s civil religious vision,

⁵ See previous footnote.

participation in the anthem ritual is earned, not presumed: he will stand when the nation demonstrates its commitment to core ideals. Contrary to Tebow's celebratory gesture, Kaepernick's kneeling serves as both a prayer and a lament.

To disrupt a group ritual, a single non-conforming body must command and retain attention. As a former Super Bowl quarterback, Kaepernick was prominent enough to be noticed, but not until he coupled his protest with a symbolically laden gesture did it truly become disruptive. When enacted at the "right" times, the league-sanctioned prayer stance invests the game and its staging of civil religion with the aura of the sacred. By taking a knee at the "wrong" time, Kaepernick invoked the American values that he holds sacred to expose the chasm between these values and actual American behavior. Wrenching the kneeling gesture out of a context that showcased docile religiosity activated its power to confront the racial violence that unreflective participation in the anthem ritual obscures, and thus, helps perpetuate.

As with Tebow, the cultural resonance of Kaepernick's gesture has had little to do with his intent. Kaepernick switched from sitting to kneeling as a show of respect for service members. The day he first knelt, Kaepernick also stood for a rendition of "God Bless America" and clapped as the troops were honored. "I'm not anti-American," he stated after the game. "I love America. I love people. That's why I'm doing this. I want to make America better" (Vasilogambros 2016). Yet it wasn't the *form* of protest that bothered Kaepernick's detractors. It was the fact that he protested at all.

Would Tebow have faced similar backlash had he knelt during the anthem to, say, draw attention to a signature evangelical social cause such as abortion? He has been outspoken on the issue, most notably in a 2010 Super Bowl commercial. This reflects his commitment to put faith first: as he said in a 2012 NFL press conference, "I have no problem, ever, sharing what I believe" (Branch and Pilon 2012). Yet his reaction to the kneeling controversy suggests an important caveat. Responding to unfounded rumors that he had knelt to protest abortion, Tebow stated, "I never did anything during a national anthem but stand and support my country" (Peter 2018).

Tebow does not lack for boldness. He was willing to confront blowback for his Super Bowl ad or for forswearing premarital sex (Law 2019). This makes his reaction to the protest rumor all the more striking. Despite an established track record of refusing to compromise his Christian beliefs, he recoiled at the prospect of kneeling during the anthem even to protest abortion, an issue that has propelled some of the most fervent evangelical activism of the past several decades. For Tebow, it seems, obeisance to the flag is vital to proper Christian practice. His Christian expression is at once courageous, insofar as he is willing to endure scorn for his personal beliefs, and docile, insofar as he is unwilling to risk even the appearance of scorning the symbols of American patriotism.

Tebow's kneeling can thus be seen as a form of docile religiosity, a religiosity that both performs and reinforces obedience to the state. If docile bodies conform reflexively, docile religiosity fosters aversion to confronting the symbols those bodies have been trained to regard as sacred. It is one thing for a sacred symbol to exist in a house of worship; for public national symbols to take on sacred status is another matter. America's founders insisted on church/state separation because they feared that a state-sanctioned church would stifle the accountability that democratic forms of government require by cloaking political symbols, leaders, and agendas with the prestige of the sacred. While church/state separation complicates political attempts to coopt the sacred, it cannot prevent them altogether.

Reaction to dissent can indicate the extent to which a given political symbol has attained sacred status. Some citizens, for instance, might feel reverence for a given president's official portrait, but as long as they tolerate those who voice dislike for the portrait, they are not treating it as sacred. When protest in *any* form triggers widespread backlash, however, the political symbol in question has become sacrosanct: it has coopted the sacred in the precise manner that church/state separation was implemented to avoid, and when religious leaders pay that symbol reflexive homage, they sanction the act of cooptation. Tebow's refusal to acknowledge *any* legitimate basis for protesting during the anthem ritual makes him party to sacralizing a national symbol. He is an exemplar of docile religiosity.

By using the NFL-sanctioned prayer gesture to protest during the anthem, Kaepernick exposed the extent to which docile religiosity has permeated American culture. Few protest methods are as innocuous as kneeling, and few causes as legitimate as exposing racial violence. Yet the offense was in the protest's mere existence. For many Americans, Kaepernick was not protesting so much as committing sacrilege. Good Americans, in their view, have docile bodies reflexively subordinate to the sacred national symbol. They do not protest this symbol under *any* circumstance—not even to draw attention to systemic racism.

No treatment of kneeling in the NFL would be complete without discussing the presidential responses to the controversies. As Bellah (Bellah [1967] 2005) maintains, the president is pivotal to articulating and perpetuating civil religion. Anthony Squiers elaborates by highlighting the importance of the executive branch to consolidating the civil religious vision that propels a particular candidate to the presidency amid our ongoing “politics of the sacred” (Squiers 2018). As representatives of divergent civil religious visions, both Barack Obama's and Donald Trump's responses bear closer analysis.

Piety, Protest, and the Presidency

At a town hall event in Fort Lee, Virginia on 28 September 2016, President Obama fielded a question from a member of the armed forces asking how he felt about the anthem protests. He affirmed that “honoring our flag and our anthem is part of what binds us together as a nation” and described the protests as a “test of our fidelity” to the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the freedom of speech. He then noted that he wanted Kaepernick and his fellow protesters to “listen to the pain that that may cause somebody who, for example, had a spouse or a child who was killed in combat and why it hurts them to see somebody not standing. But I also want people to think about the pain he may be expressing about somebody who's lost a loved one that they think was unfairly shot” (Diaz 2016). By framing the protests as a “test of fidelity” to founding principles, Obama affirmed that the protesting players were exercising constitutional rights. Whatever one's basis for frustration with the protesters, they were challenging their audience to reexamine and affirm our principles as a people.

This differs markedly in tone and content from President Trump's comments a year later. At a campaign rally for Alabama senate candidate Luther Strange on 22 September 2017, Trump noted, “Luther and I are united by the same great American values. We're proud of our country. We respect our flag! Wouldn't you love to see one of these NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, ‘Get that son of a bitch of the field right now, out, he's fired.’” Trump struck his signature pose from *The Apprentice* as he yelled once more: “He's fired!” (Jenkins 2017). Though he did not mention anyone by name, Kaepernick was a clear target.⁶ This profane tirade sets up a telling contrast. In the lead-up to the 2016 Republican National Convention, Tebow's name emerged on the short list of Trump-approved speakers. Even after Tebow declined, Trump campaign spokesman Sean Spicer quipped, “If he was able to come . . . I'm sure we could find a role for him” (ESPN 2016).

Tebow is as tireless an advocate for what he believes in as Kaepernick. Yet Trump celebrated one and reviled the other even though they are members of the same faith and known for the same gesture. From a Foucauldian standpoint, the difference boils down to which of them conforms—and what this signifies within the civil religious framework that Trump represents.

Trump professed admiration for Tebow in splashy fashion at a Florida charity auction in 2012. He put in a winning \$12,000 bid for a signed Tebow helmet and jersey and posted about it on Twitter. When the Trump Foundation closed by court order in December 2018, it listed the helmet alongside two massive portraits of Trump among its remaining assets (Bonesteel 2018).

For all his ire toward Kaepernick, Trump does not seem to have given Tebow's kneeling a second thought. Tebow had intended the gesture to make others think about honoring God. This was clearly lost on Trump, who authorized the legally dubious maneuver of having his foundation cut the check

⁶ Colin's mother Teresa responded memorably via Twitter, “Guess that makes me a proud bitch!” (Kaepernick 2017).

to cover the winning bid rather than pay for it himself (Farenthold 2016). This goes to show just how easily the intended message of docile religious display can be subsumed by an overarching emphasis on fidelity to the state.

To label Kaepernick a non-conformist is misleading. Rallying a team to the Super Bowl requires coordinating with others and carrying out instructions. Given his superior mechanics and on-field stats, Kaepernick in many ways *better* exemplified the disciplined NFL body than Tebow did. Yet unlike Tebow, Kaepernick was willing to uncouple discipline from conformity. Kneeling during the anthem manifested commitment to values that transcended sport and nation. When the nation failed to uphold these values, he broke rank in a way that disclosed these deeper allegiances. After explaining his reasons, Kaepernick did little to keep the protests going besides continuing to kneel. Such is the power of the disciplined body that does the right gesture, in the right way, at the wrong time.

Obama's and Trump's reactions reflect divergent civil religious visions. In Obama's vision, good Americans have disciplined bodies that exercise and defend sacred constitutional rights and founding principles, even if that means defying one of America's most potent unifying rituals. In Trump's vision, good Americans have docile bodies that uphold the sacred anthem ritual without exception and regard any form of protest as sacrilege. Kaepernick exemplifies the disciplined body that will protest the anthem in defense of transcendent values. Tebow exemplifies the docile body that treats the anthem ritual itself as sacred. Though their postures are the same, they are expressing contrasting forms of the "politics of the sacred," with differing notions of what core American values should be.

8. Conclusions: A More Perfect Union

Nike's "dream crazy" ad campaign marked a watershed moment in Kaepernick's legacy. Shoe burnings and brand boycotts were powerless to stop the spread of Kaepernick's image. The iconoclast was now a global icon.

A notable veteran of athletic protest foresaw this outcome. After Kaepernick first took a knee, Harry Edwards, the sports sociologist and mastermind behind Tommie Smith and John Carlos's raised fists at the 1968 Olympics, convinced him to sign the shoes and jersey he had worn. Edwards then sent the items to the Smithsonian, noting, "he's this generation's (Muhammad) Ali" (Bell 2017).

Although Kaepernick's iconic status seems assured, it is worth asking whether it has value beyond securing lucrative merchandizing deals. Kaepernick, after all, protested on behalf of the same basic civil rights issues as Ali, Smith, or Carlos. If injustice persisted following their iconic protests, why would Kaepernick's yield a different result? For Edwards, this line of reasoning misses the point: "Social, cultural, and political movements are critical, not because they always succeed, or because the gains that they achieve endure, but because they compel society to confront and engage key challenges and contradictions." For the ideals of our "more perfect union" to remain salient, each generation must take up the mantle of striving for them (Edwards 2017, p. 167).

Bellah and Foucault give us conceptual tools for making sense of the cultural context in which this striving unfolds. Bellah's treatment of civil religion has spurred rich reflection on the civil religious functions of sports that captures why an NFL anthem ritual became central to hashing out American contradictions and ideals. Foucault's concept of docile bodies makes sense of why simple shifts in the form, timing, and placement of gestures radically alter how they are perceived. In panoptic spectacle, a single out-of-synch posture can undercut a ritual's synchronizing power, and when the disruptive gesture is religious, the cultural values encoded in that ritual come under the implicit scrutiny of a transcendent higher law.

The notion of docile bodies also gives us a framework for making sense of America's challenges and contradictions, particularly regarding race. In panoptic societies, some bodies are presumed docile: they operate with the expectation that the legal and surveillance apparatus protects them. Other bodies are presumed hostile: to avoid run-ins with neighbors, teachers, bosses, or police, they must perform docility by adopting deliberately scripted modes of dressing, moving, and talking. Though these scripts can temper suspicion of hostility, they cannot eliminate it. No matter how careful

they are, presumptively hostile bodies remain vulnerable to potentially lethal forms of surveillance and discipline (Coates 2015, p. 81). Kaepernick pushes us to interrogate how America categorizes bodies as docile or hostile. When these categories are race-based, the surveillance and disciplinary apparatus singles out people of color to deadly effect. To protest police brutality is to call out the racial injustice that the American panoptic state has normalized. Automatic and widespread backlash to such protest reveals how deep this normalization runs.

The notion of docile bodies supplies a vocabulary for describing unjust structures and their effects. It shows how a simple gesture can unmask these structures by confronting the symbols invoked to protect them. In addition, coupled with Bellah's notion of civil religion, it helps us understand the power of religious gestures on NFL sidelines to protest injustice or legitimate the status quo. In short, these notions clarify what we support, what we oppose, and how to strive for a more perfect union in a panoptic age.

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