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Challenging the Integration of Youth, Faith, and Sports: Alternative Religious Beliefs and Assumptions

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Abstract: The sport/faith interface has long been a site of contention for religious youth who routinely experience two significant obstacles to living out their faith amidst the complexities of sporting locales. The first is a general problem that pertains to the character of adolescent spirituality and is typified by a subscription to a compromised, diluted religious belief system known as Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD). The second concerns the way in which the Christian religion functions as a servant to sport and when the reality of the gospel becomes subordinate to the identity, power, and cultural meaning and norms of the institution of sports and is commonly termed 'sportianity'. This paper maps the contours of a high school retreat for Christian student-athletes—Baylor University's Faith and Sports Institute (FSI) retreat- that intentionally seeks to address these problems. The paper is theological in that we interpret MTD as a religious belief system and how it structures and orients reality and the lived experiences of Christians in general and religious youth in particular. As contributors to the original design of the retreat, we unpack some of the relevant working cultural and religious presuppositions that have the potential to dominate how Christians think about and practice the integration of faith and sports. In turn, we explain key aspects of the baseline narrative for the design and development of the retreat and tease out how these presuppositions are antithetical to orthodox Christianity. In conclusion, we suggest a number of immediate implications that frame how the FSI retreat has moved forward in relation to the integration of Christian faith and sports.

Keywords: Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD); transcendence; immanence; integration; faith; sports; theology; God



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1. Introduction

Religious youth face many significant obstacles to living out their faith in the complex contexts of sports. The first obstacle is a general problem that pertains to the character of adolescent spirituality. The second concerns the faith of Christians in the contested site of sports. Each of these obstacles can thwart spiritual formation and responsible living as followers of Christ in and through sports. Beginning in 2002, a team of US-based researchers with the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) uncovered the first type of obstacle which revealed that religious youth increasingly subscribe to a compromised, diluted religious belief system. This caricature of orthodox faith, known as Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD), transmutes into a creed that confesses to and practices a religion that is about being nice, achieving personal happiness, and feeling good about oneself, while keeping God at a safe distance until and unless an individual experiences problems that s/he needs resolved, with God relegated to a divine butler and therapist to serve humans. This general problem is not unique to religious athletes, for this religious imposter has effectively colonized many congregations and Christian institutions and organizations (Smith and Denton 2005, pp. 166, 171; Dean 2010).

The second obstacle is specific to Christians in sports. This barrier to orthodox faith received popular attention when *Sports Illustrated* writer, Frank Deford (1976b), labelled the faith–sport problem among evangelical Christians as “Sportianity”. Sportianity is what he perceived as a compromised synthesis of Christianity and Sports which he wrote about in 1976 in a critical three-part series on “Religion in Sport” (Deford 1976a, 1976b, 1976c). The compromise, in principle, occurs when the Christian religion functions as a servant to sport and when the reality of the gospel becomes subordinate to the identity, power, and cultural meaning and norms of the institution of sports.

Hoffman elaborates on the problem of Sportianity when he declares that the issue fundamentally lies with “a Christian community unable or unwilling to draw firm lines between the ethos that has a stranglehold on sports and that which lies at the core of some of its most cherished teachings” (Hoffman 2010, p. 264). As H. Richard Niebuhr (1951) argues in his classic study *Christ and Culture*, this is the perennial problem that Christians have historically faced when trying to figure out how the gospel relates to, influences, and engages the contexts and cultures that the church paradoxically lives “in” yet not “of” because of the Church’s vocational identity as aliens and sojourners.

This paper lays out the contours of alternative and unorthodox religious beliefs and assumptions specific to MTD that functioned as one of the background problems that influenced the founding of the Faith and Sports Institute (FSI) high school retreat for Christian student-athletes at Baylor University. The paper is theological in that we seek to interpret MTD as a religious belief system and how it structures and orients reality and the lived experiences of Christian in general and religious youth in particular. By properly diagnosing and knowing this substitute worldview, it helped us in our prescription so that what we developed concerning Christian teaching, character, and practices could function as a solution to the problem. Although our specific focus is the deistic elements of MTD regarding God’s transcendence and immanence in particular, further research is needed to ascertain the extent to which FSI’s retreat curriculum, rituals, and experiential learning, might supply the scaffolding for resisting the contours of MTD and even Sportianity which, as imposters of the faith, hinder the spiritual formation of adolescence (Dean 2010). We endeavor to unpack some of the relevant working cultural and religious presuppositions that have the potential to dominate how Christians think about and practice the integration of faith and sports. We explain aspects of the *why* or warrant that serves as the baseline narrative for the design and development of a high school retreat. While we do not plumb the *what* and *how* of the retreat’s structure regarding its distinctive content and how the cultivation of theological literacy and contemplative, competitive sports pedagogies and immersion experiences directly address and counter MTD’s beliefs and practices, we do tease out how these presuppositions are antithetical and therefore opposed to orthodox Christianity and suggest a number of immediate implications that frame how FSI’s retreat has moved forward when considering the integration of Christian faith and sports.

Baylor University’s George W. Truett’s Theological Seminary received a grant in 2015 from Lilly Endowment, Inc. (Indianapolis, IN, USA) to establish a high school youth theology initiative, which is now one of the primary pillars of the University’s Faith and Sports Institute.¹ FSI’s high school retreat’s unique focus on faith and sports is the first of its kind within the network of High School Youth Theology Institutes Initiatives (Lilly Endowment, Inc. 2023), joining a family of over 100 college and seminary-based youth theology programs and institutes, the first of these being launched by Candler School of Theology at Emory University in July 1993 (Dean and Hearlson 2016). Broadly speaking, these institutes organize themselves around two primary goals. The first is to allow youth to think creatively and constructively about how the wisdom of Scripture and theological traditions can and should inform and transform their identity and vocational discernment in ministry and religious callings as they learn to negotiate and navigate complex global and contemporary ethical challenges. The second is to “identify and cultivate a cadre of theologically minded youth who will become leaders in church and society” (Lilly Endowment, Inc. 2015). FSI focuses on creating space for youth to reflect on the vision,

vocabulary, and virtues of faith with peers and mentors so that through identity-forming practices they learn to connect and integrate Christian convictions and character into sports and life. FSI's stated purpose is as follows: "Inspiring Christian youth to intentionally integrate their faith in God-directed ways that frees them to be discerning, vibrant leaders alive to their own and to others' well-being in and through sports" (White 2015).

2. The Religious Problem for Christian Adolescents: Defining the Problem and Consequences of MTD

Between 2002 and 2008, a large three-wave research study of teenage spirituality in the US was conducted by the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR). NSYR's web page states the following:

... the purpose of the NSYR is to research the shape and influence of religion and spirituality in the lives of American youth; to identify effective practices in the religious, moral, and social formation of the lives of youth; to describe the extent and perceived effectiveness of the programs and opportunities that religious communities are offering to their youth; and to foster an informed national discussion about the influence of religion in youth's lives, in order to encourage sustained reflection about and rethinking of our cultural and institutional practices with regard to youth and religion. (NSYR 2023)

The details of all three waves of the project are beyond the scope of this paper; however, the initial study consisted of "a nationally representative telephone survey [employing random-digit-dial method] of 3290 English- and Spanish-speaking teenagers between 13 and 17, and of their parents" followed up with "267 in-depth, face-to-face interviews" with these teenagers (Smith and Denton 2005, pp. 6, 292). The first wave of the study was conducted between 2002 and 2005, the second in 2005, and the third between 2007 and 2008, followed up with a combination of telephone surveys and interviews of more than 2500 of the same cohort of respondents with the goal of understanding their religious faith as they transitioned to emerging adulthood (see Denton and Pearce 2011; Smith and Snell 2009).

One of the most important conclusions of the study centered on the religious attitude of many of the adolescents concerned. Smith and Denton (2005, p. 171) claim that their brand of Christianity was "either degenerating into a pathetic version of itself or, more significantly ... actively being colonized and displaced by a quite different religious faith". Although there are minority voices that flank both sides of the dominant view of religion, for a significant number of religious youths in the U.S., a conversion from "actual historic Christian tradition" to "its alternative religious vision of divinely underwritten personal happiness and interpersonal niceness" has occurred (p. 171). Smith and Denton coined the neologism Moral Therapeutic Deism (MTD) for this new brand of faith. Although MTD is not formally a religion, Smith and Denton assert that "[I]ts typical embrace is de facto, functional, practical, and tacit" (p. 166). How did we get to this place where many youth and families conform to an anemic spirituality, "a bargain religion", and superficial creed regarding God's transcendence and immanence and pursue an anthropology and ethic more focused on the "cult of nice" and consumer-driven therapeutic individualism and pragmatism than true Christian faith where concepts, actions, and doctrines such as salvation, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, sin, glorifying God, God as Trinity, repentance, and obedience are core to what it means to follow God (Dean 2010, pp. 3–24; Smith and Denton 2005, pp. 162–71)?

Practical theologian and youth and family ministry expert, Andrew Root, builds upon the work of Charles Taylor, to explain how we arrived at our current "age of authenticity" where different beliefs about God and humans have been added that "blocked the doorway that once widely welcomed people into experience of divine action", obstructing encounters with transcendence and pushing belief or faith and formation further from divine encounters (Root 2017, p. 104). Taylor's historical account of secularization broadly covers how various social imaginaries (Secular 1, Secular 2, and Secular 3), which is "the way ordinary people 'imagine' their social surroundings" (Taylor 2007, p. 172), developed

from the 12th to the 21st century. Though it is beyond the scope of the present discussion to delve into the nuances and complexities of Taylor's argument, we deploy his account to provide context and philosophical/religious grounding to MTD. Taylor begins his telling of the history of Western Society in the pre-modern period of medieval times when belief in God was largely assumed due to the social and cosmic imaginaries, for it was held that we live in an enchanted world where transcendence and the immanent, temporal plane of everyday living co-exist and interpenetrate each other. Taylor calls this Secular 1. However, in modernity, (designated Secular 2 by Taylor), alternative plausibility conditions occurred which were determined by the new scientific outlook of the Enlightenment. These new conditions of belief affected what people considered believable. Taylor's interpretation does not follow the traditional interpretation that saw the new science and religion as simply an ideological war with science progressively proving that religious explanations are no longer plausible for making sense of how our world works, and thus religious beliefs are merely eliminated or subtracted from the social imaginary. Rather, Taylor resists the reductive accounts of the subtraction thesis or stories of secularism and offers a different story where other beliefs were added, such as exclusive humanism. Exclusive humanism tells a story that eclipses transcendence because it builds from the premise of "a purely self-sufficient humanism. . . [that accepts] no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing" (Taylor, 18). This means that the transcendent (sacred) and the immanent (secular, ordinary life) no longer collide or mix because it was held that the human will determined meaning, purpose, and reality, contesting the belief in God as Creator and Maker. The ordered whole of the cosmos of the pre-modern period where God's purposes gave shape and meaning to the universe is displaced by human effort and thus, the logical stance is to go no further than humans when making sense of our "natural" world (Taylor, 91). Consequently, a theistic worldview shifts to anthropocentric commitments and resources when making sense of the world we inhabit. Taylor explains that this move was a step in the direction of blinding us from the wonder of God as the Artisan of the created order and, consequently, negating the supernatural. Root adds that with this change, "[D]ivine action is much harder to encounter. . . Because these [secular] spaces have become defined mostly as material, cultural, and societal, the doorway into the transcendent becomes very segregated" (Root 2017, p. 109). When applied to activities such as sports, the compartmentalization of religion and sports becomes "natural" since the characteristics of sports, with its own regulated order, rules, and internally specific goals (autotelicity), time and space, and freedom, double down to combine with the exclusive humanism, strengthening the autonomization of the self and the self's practices, draining religious meaning from ordinary activities. Why look to God and how God relates to sports because the transcendent orientation is offset by a deistic God that is essentially dispensable and now the human vocation in sports is primarily focused on human flourishing.

Additionally, after the Enlightenment, Root notes, drawing again from Taylor's account, how "we slowly shifted from concern over clashing transcendent realities to the genuineness of *my own* individual experience" (Root 2017, p. 5). This turn to the self is labelled by Taylor as "expressive individualism", in which the aim is to realize the potential of and be true to our authentic self (Taylor 2007, p. 473). Taylor plots this understanding of life as emerging originally from the expressivism of the late-modern Romantic period, and then how it slowly migrated from the high culture elite of artists and intellectuals in the nineteenth century to the mainstream populace in the late 1960s. For Taylor, the 1960s are the "hinge moment" for the "individuating revolution" when "this kind of self-orientation seems to have become a mass phenomenon" (Taylor 2007, p. 473). The third sense of secular is called Secular 3 because the addition of beliefs now makes it plausible for the human longing or quest to find meaning and significance, what Taylor refers to as "fullness", as a power that lies within our own human minds in the immanent frame rather than power beyond or outside of humans, discounting appeals to or beliefs in divine action and involvement in life. Root summarizes (109) "Where Secular 1 sees transcendence in different planes of existence and Secular 2 relegates transcendence to a spatial division

between the religious and a-religious, Secular 3 ultimately finds transcendence and divine action unbelievable". Root sees this larger cultural context of the Age of Authenticity as the soil that provides the nourishment to grow something like MTD. He states (Root 2017, p. 12), "We struggle with MTD because we have not realized that we've lost the essential nutrients of the believability of transcendence". He continues later in his book that "MTD is a form of faith where the actuality of a personal (ontologically other) God is unbelievable and transcendence is impossible" (Root 2017, p. 112). Accordingly, religious youth swim and operate in sports and life in a closed system that tells them that they are cut off from divine encounter and actions or the supernatural, negating transcendence.

FSI's high school retreat was launched in response to matters specific to the malaise of MTD. Yet the theological interpretation proposed by the FSI staff team consciously sought to avoid turning our approach into some apologetic, and thus simply a defensive attack on MTD. In agreement with Root, we misunderstand MTD when we get mired in the Secular 2 imaginary that frames the problem as guarding and maintaining a specific religious space or institution over against a perceived threat from another worldview (Root, p. 108). The retreat invites youth, their parents, coaches, and mentors to explore how to theologically interpret and connect religious convictions and practices with sport as a prized, contested aspect of life. FSI's tagline of *Redefining Greatness* puts an emphasis on reimagining the lived experience of sports according to Christian doctrine and virtues. In addition, because a primary vocation in professional sports is not the calling of most Christian teenagers, reflection on the moral and spiritual issues germane to the tangible narrative of sports serve as a dynamic laboratory for testing and deepening their religious identity and values, to prepare them to be discerning, vibrant leaders in their respective future callings. As the summarizing term for the common creed that unites adolescent religion and spirituality in the United States, researchers codify MTD according to five tenets (Smith and Denton 2005, pp. 162–65). Though there is overlap between the five, we place the primary emphasis of each tenet in brackets:

1. [Deism] A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. [Moralistic] God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. [Therapeutic] The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. [Deism and Therapeutic] God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when he is needed to resolve a problem.
5. [Moralistic] Good people go to heaven when they die.

3. Deistic God: More Absent Than Present in Daily Life

For the purposes of the present discussion, our primary focus is on the first and fourth of the above principles, since these two tenets resemble the beliefs in a deistic God "who exists, created the world, and defines our general moral order, but not one who is particularly personally involved in one's affairs—especially affairs in which one would prefer not to have God involved" (Smith and Denton 2005, p. 164). This view holds that God is the primary cause and transcendent creator who stands above and distant from creaturely life. God is also a moral lawgiver who leaves us guidelines for living. This means, God's moral law is purposefully built into the original natural order, but now God as author and creator is remote, or "keeps a safe distance", and thus God is not immanent. Transcendence minus God's immanence. God "does not become too personally involved in the process" other than selectively accommodating our needs when religious adolescents face troubles or problems that they need fixing. God is perceived as the supreme counselor who is available to his counselees in a self-help sense, which fits the therapeutic aspect in that teenage believers expect God to only show up when they need God's blessings and benefits (Smith and Denton 2005, pp. 165–66). Smith and Denton explain from their interviews that this portrait of God is one who is "watching over everything from above. . .just up there now controlling everything" (p. 165).

4. Transcendence and Christian Orthodoxy

An orthodox view of God holds that the Christian (Triune) God is both transcendent and immanent. Grenz and Olson (1992) write about the theological importance of the balance between God's transcendence and immanence. When the equilibrium of the dialectic of the pair of truths about how God relates to creation and culture is not affirmed, and thus the balance is disrupted if not broken, a distinctive idea of who God is and how Christians believe in and relate to God is impaired and lost. In turn, Tanner (1988, p. 169) argues how important the coherence of Christian thought is when talking about the God–world relationship. She holds that basic theological rules and doctrinal grammar dictate that “traditional affirmations about God and the world come to hang together intelligibly once again”. When talk about God violates the “meta-level rules” of discourse, what goes wrong or is altered is not merely on the level of syntax but it is also a trespass against reality, i.e., mistaken and misused language about God distorts our beliefs and perceptions of God, self, others, and creation with the attendant Christian practices or what is “done by Christians in their daily lives” not matching and departing from the grammar of the Christian community discourse about how God relates to world. This means that unfaithful talk and thoughts about God result not only in incompetence about what is said but, because Christian theology reflects on Christian practices and forms of life, the loss of coherence, due to the confusion about the God–world relationship, extends to specific attitudes and behaviors that are “inappropriate to a Christian life” (Tanner 1988, pp. 14, 17).

When, for example, God's transcendence takes precedence over God's immanence, the Christian faith loses its relevance in cultural contexts and God appears less active in theatres of action such as sports, or, when God's immanence is overstated at the expense of divine transcendence, this thinking domesticates God, divesting God of God's majesty and mystery, which often happens when the church overconforms to the acceptable thought-forms and practices of a particular culture.² As intimated above, Charles Taylor demonstrates that what happens when a worldview negates or subtracts God's transcendence from this world, in arguing that the “closed world structures” of the “immanent frame” become normative for how humans operate in this world, or when God is pushed out the everyday world of religious youth and their parents', the authority of God's ultimate claim on their lives is weakened since this world is closed off from God and subsequently this leaves God on the margins in a de-chanted world. He states that “It [the immanent frame] is the sense of absence; it is the sense that all order, all meaning comes from us. We encounter no echo outside” (Taylor 2007, pp. 346, 542).

This problem concerning beliefs, practices, and language specific to the God–world relationship relates to another important finding from the NSYR's first wave of research data. Smith and Denton (2005, p. 131) note that youth can be “incredibly inarticulate about their faith, their religious beliefs and practices, and its meaning or place in their lives”, reasoning that this problem of inarticulacy is “because they [teenage youth] have not been effectively educated in and provided opportunities to practice talking about their faith” (p. 133). Dean (2010, p. 142) consults Smith and Denton regarding their citation of Charles Taylor who argues that “inarticulacy undermines the possibilities of reality”. Dean continues that “The grammars, vocabularies, dictions, and accents of particular languages shape us into people with particular identities and imaginations”, and therefore, “a theological vocabulary that helps us talk about God also helps us imagine what a God-shaped world looks like. . . and youth who do not have a language for Christ are unlikely to imagine an identity *in Christ*” (142).

5. God's Transcendence

For traditional theism, God as creator is infinitely beyond and above space and time, since God exists independent of the created, contingent world. Biblical religion describes God's transcendence in terms of divine greatness or majesty, authority, and power. God is sovereign and set apart, and in the Apostle's Creed, for instance, Christians confess that they believe in God “the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth”. That means, God

is ontologically distinct and qualitatively different from all that is not-God, i.e., created, finite reality (Gilkey 1959). God is *sui generis*. Christian theology speaks about God's aseity (Latin: *a se*, "from himself") when explaining that God is self-existent, because God is the source of his own existence, which means that God is an absolute and necessary being. This means that God is not merely greater than humans by an infinite (quantitative) degree, since this would erroneously start with comparing and contrasting creaturely dimensions with who God is in order to understand how God relates to the world. The flawed assumption that stands behind this interpretation of the God–world relationship, according to Placher (1996, p. 7), is that philosophers and theologians in the seventeenth century talked about God by "explaining God's difference from created things by saying that God was *transcendent* (distant, unaffected) in *contrast* to *immanent* (close, engaged)". Instead of understanding that God is in a radically different category of kinds and ontologically independent of creation, "they set the stage for talking about transcendence as one of the definable properties God possesses", a quality believed to be grasped by human thought, which Placher argues resulted in the domestication of transcendence.

God's transcendence is proclaimed in the book of Psalms in the motif of the Lord's rule and providential reign of creation and salvation, portraying God as King (Ps. 93; 96; 97; 98). In Psalm 24:1-2, the psalmist celebrates the good news that the Lord as the creator and sustainer of all that exists means that God owns the world. In the Hebrew text, the author leads off syntactically in verse 1 with a prepositional phrase, "The Lord's is the earth", denoting the idea of possession and belonging (Mays 1994, p. 119). Biblical scholar James L. Mays deduces a couple of salient points from this emphatic assertion about reality. Since God's ownership comprehensively includes all that there is, then everything and everybody who inhabits God's world is dependent on and belongs to God's sovereign care and control. Humans as creatures are part of the whole diverse fabric of contingent creation. Consequently, humans depend on God's creative activity to live, work, relate, and play which further entails that all that humans make, say, and do are under the delegated power and ownership of God (Mays 1994, p. 120).

Mays (1994, p. 120) sees this confession about the Lord's reign and ownership functioning as a bold denial of and polemic against all other "human rulers and entrepreneurs whose ownership of parts of the world always tended to absolutize itself". Flanagan (2022) writes in *Take Back the Game* how the money and mania of organized youth sports in America pressures and distresses youth and families. The promise of future outcomes and goods such as college scholarships and admissions to better and elite colleges can challenge who ultimately is in charge, evidenced in how sports can deprive youth of their personal dignity and shortchange the present-value goods of healthy experiences in sports. Youth are caught between the options of earthly (immanent) demands or the urges of Secular 3, and the reverberation of transcendence, or what Taylor refers to as "cross-pressure". Sadly, such intrinsic and extrinsic pressures often foreclose the religious identity and purposes of many youths.

6. Implications of Transcendence

Systemic theologian Shirley Guthrie (2018) reminds us that all created goods depend on God, which frees Christian believers to live joyfully, thankfully, and responsibly in our different callings and spheres of life. The doctrine of God interconnects with the doctrine of creation. Guthrie builds on this idea of God and creation by recognizing "that although the created world is good, it is not God" (162). A number of significant implications emerge from the theological fact of God's transcendence that have importance for how FSI thinks about integration and counters the myth of MTD and the other concomitant forces in the context of modern sports.

First, because of the corresponding truths about God's transcendence and our utter dependence on God for our existence, "nothing in all creation can have absolute and undefeatable control over us" (Guthrie 2018, p. 162). The immanent horizon conversely backs into the transcendent horizon. That is, this totalizing threat on the horizontal human

plane of everyday living also presents a problem on the vertical dimension of faith in God. Based on who God is, the institutions and authorities of sports are relativized, which the Christian doctrine of God contests with and demythologizes various regnant ideologies or powers that subdue human freedom and dignity. Theologian Karl Barth writes that these powers or ideologies promise “liberation, strength, ease, simplification, and enrichment”, though in reality “they are inhuman”, and thus, they pervert institutions like sports as they “destroy”, “oppress”, “afflict”, and “harass” individuals (Barth 1981, pp. 232–33). What we see going on at an existential and affective level with youth and families becoming anxious, fearful, and angry when they do not realize their “ultimate performances”, which in turn earn the supposed extrinsic benefits and rewards of competitive sports, also touches upon central concerns related to God as Creator and Ruler. The threats and tyrannical enslaving power that can come from sports participation need not be feared, since Christians confess that they belong to God, who is their owner, which as a fundamental declaration opposes and denies that ultimate power or control to anyone else (Mays 1994, p. 120). Second, and relatedly, nothing can have absolute control over humans simply because God is the measure of truth and value. Since God is the standard of what is good, true, and beautiful, Christians can morally criticize abuses and distortions in sports and life. The locus of value is outside of the immanent, which also means that the claim of the good is mediated to Christians in the authority of the gospel as revealed in the self-giving of God in Christ (O’Donovan 1994, pp. 73–74, 89–90).

Third, Systematic Theologian, Millard Erickson (1985, p. 317), who similarly composes his own list of the doctrinal consequences of transcendence and immanence, identifies how transcendence reframes how we think about soteriology in that “salvation is not our achievement”. Salvation not by human effort or constructs flies in the face of the story of self-sufficiency in the age of authenticity as determined by the immanent frame. Root (2017, p. 183) sees, however, how the age of authenticity ironically opens youth to seek a sense of purpose and transformation because youth “bump against the cold and unforgiving (but sturdy) beams of the immanent frame”. The immanent frame “is a cold, restrictive prison” that comes up short with supplying ultimate meaning, and thus, it is found wanting. He notes that the relentless search for meaning within and beyond the immanent (natural and material) frame is because of what Taylor refers to as the “nova effect”. This effect is the explosion of an array of options and new ways to discover “fullness” as a reaction to the intense pressures of living as self-sufficient persons who are supposedly cut off from God. The experience of emptiness, loss, and the absence of meaning that are part of life pushes and pulls youth “to seek the real or true in and through the experiential”. This existential struggle further means the attention given to experience in the age of authenticity can also awaken youth to ways out of the prison of immanence because the Christian story of salvation is one that erupts in the midst of our loneliness, alienation, loss, and brokenness (Root 2017, pp. 115–17). Hence, the conflicts and pressures of finding “fullness” beg for ways to help youth reimagine how the integration of faith and sports at FSI’s retreat is a site for divine encounters and action. However, the doubts about and unbelief in transcendence within Secular 3 can also dampen or deafen the “echoes of transcendence”. Taylor (2007, p. 550) states that, “What pushes us one way or the other is what we might describe as our over-all take on human life”. Furthermore, when the hegemony of the Secular 3 imaginary triumphs, the quest for salvation is answered from below as a form of self-actualization (Root 2017). This is a live option because the immanent frame’s sense of absence means “that all order, all meaning comes from us” (Taylor 2007, p. 376), resulting in salvation as a human work or achievement (Root 2017).

How might salvation as a human achievement get traction in sports in the age of authenticity? Figurational sociologist Joseph Maguire goes one step further than Flanagan in his investigation of sports when he analyzes how the sports-industrial complex can displace human development with a “performance efficiency model”, making athletes nothing more than cogs in the machinery and totalizing processes of modern sports (Maguire 2004). Like Flanagan, Maguire advances concerns around issues such as specialization to demonstrate

how the demands of modern-day sports are damaging and strangling other qualities and values that contribute to what it means to be human. Maguire culls from an array of sports scholars to consider how the rationalization and scientization of sports obligates athletes to strive for a “performance efficiency model” focusing on factors like maximizing the development of their skills and abilities, among other sports science strategies and training regimes (see also [Jones et al. 2020](#)). Maguire concludes that “[T]he ideology and findings of sports science, concerned with identifying the conditions necessary to produce the ultimate performance, sustain the superman myth” ([Maguire 2004](#), p. 309). This myth, according to Maguire (302), is “a performance so great that it eclipses the efforts of ‘mere mortals’”. The logic of this scientific viewpoint joins with the sporting powers that be to absolutize optimal performances and outcomes of the game like breaking records, and overemphasize winning, resulting in a theologically and morally questionable view of humanity.

When sportspersons think they are locked into the inescapable web of the immanent frame, one of the options is to divinize humanity, in which human freedom becomes exercising human power to have technical mastery over the self and nature. According to [Taylor \(2007, p. 548\)](#), the “closed world system” of the “the colossal success of modern natural science and the associated technology can lead us to feel that it unlocks all mysteries, that it will ultimately explain everything”. On one hand, the god of Deism subtracts God’s presence from nature and culture, while, on the other hand, with God being absent, it gives Promethean control and power to humans who essentially function as lords over creation and, in our case, the world of sports. Fullness in this sense is located exclusively within individual human lives as a quest toward human achievement as fulfillment and flourishing. This imaginary inverts the creator–creature relationship.

The athletes who come to the FSI summer retreat have the potential to not only be exposed to (perhaps struggle with) the toxicity of MTD, but they are also familiar with a system of dominant cultural norms and forces that have the potential to promote unorthodox spiritual perspectives and goals. Collectively, these experiences can take their imaginations captive in how they perceive God, others, and themselves as they compete, even making it possible for them to believe that they can flourish by relying on resources exclusive to their own human making and power. Moreover, this move theologically, according to [Kathryn Tanner \(1988, pp. 121–23\)](#), is toward a Pelagian direction where talk of creaturely capacities, power, and freedom is contrasted with and in competitive conflict with God’s sovereignty and transcendence. And it undermines our absolute dependence on God for life. If God is silent in terms of the social imaginary of MTD, then God’s distance leaves the immanent frame as a place to justify and prove one’s existence. That is, since God has left the sport arena and created order, it is entirely up to humans to find their own significance and purpose in life. Salvation, in the Christian story, is the restorative work of God, whereas as renewed creatures, humans realize God’s intended purposes. But this transformation does not result in us ontically becoming like God since humans are humans and God is God.

Fourth, when sports or any other cultural activity demand unquestioning allegiance or loyalty, this challenges our worship in God alone ([Guthrie 2018, p. 62](#)). Because the goods of sports as a feature of society are created constructs, which humans and a network of political, economic, and educational institutions invest with meaning drawn from a constellation of beliefs and values ([Coakley 2007](#)), they can easily become overvalued, boosted, and inflated to an ultimate concern or good ([Tillich 1968](#)). Like any other creaturely love or good, sports can turn into an idol ([White 2008](#)). The Bible explains in the fall narrative of Genesis 3 that distorted powers tempt us to become like God (Gen. 3:5) and, when heeded, humans tragically usurp God’s authority in their attempts to become their own lords and masters ([Barth 1981, p. 214](#)). Rather than maintain our dependence on and under God’s care, humans put themselves on the throne of power and worship. Flawed reasoning about who God is also results in the misrepresentation, rejection of, and harm to our true humanity.

7. God's Immanence

At the same time, God is also near and very present to us in creation, in history, in God becoming human (Christ incarnate), and in sending His Spirit to indwell and gift His people and community, i.e., the church, to do God's will on earth as it is in heaven. Smith and Denton add that "this God [Deism] is not Trinitarian, he did not speak through the Torah or the prophets of Israel, was never resurrected from the dead, and does not fill and transform people through his Spirit" (Smith and Denton, p. 165). God's immanence means God is intimately close and actively present in human lives.

In FSI's curriculum, one of the first questions we invite youth to consider is 'whose are we?' The premise of this opening teaching session is that "We got to get God right in order to get sports right". Our curriculum and teaching further identifies how various false views of God (e.g., God is conditional, God is angry, God is distant, and God is unpredictable) and self (e.g., I am unforgiveable, I am unfixable, I am excluded, I am stuck, and I am alone) compound the problem and search for true answers about who God is and Christians' own identity truths. Knowing and trusting that God is the source of meaning, purpose, and value for all things created (including sports) is fundamental to true worship and living out the fullness that Taylor describes. FSI promotes the belief that reclaiming what Dean explains as the peculiar God-story is a primary antidote to the problem of MTD (Dean 2010, pp. 22, 104). FSI's pedagogical framework assumes that God is a God who desires to encounter and meet us in daily life for the Bible's storyline reveals disciples and followers of God having repeated encounters that transformed their lives.³ More specifically, FSI adapts aspects of Smart's (1996) dimensions of religion so that all of the retreat's learning experiences create the conditions for the sacred to touch down in the world of sport. The ritualistic, experiential, and material dimensions are three that we employ for the sake of merging doctrine and Christian beliefs with experience and practice, which gives agency to religious youth to communicate their feelings with the hope that these tangible practices will enliven the embodied life of the five senses in their encounters with God in a supportive community. Each day of the FSI retreat centers around teaching sessions from a specific story from the Bible with a corresponding sports virtue lab where we translate the doctrine from the teaching to sports participation, giving young people an opportunity to experiment with and try on these new perspectives with helpful tools for remembering and enacting Christian convictions and character on the field of play. The content and character of historic Christianity hold to a different toolkit where the language, creed, community, purpose, stories, and practices portray God and how God relates to us in radically different ways (Dean 2010, pp. 47–60). This is important, according to Dean, because "[W]ho we are and what we do as religious people are decisively shaped by the kind of God we worship" (Dean 2010, p. 71). How we imagine and talk about God makes all the difference in how we live and worship. Dean describes how highly religious youth know God as personal and powerful. Contrary to MTD adolescents, who trade God's power for God's approval, the doctrine of God proper keeps the two together as derived from God's nature.

FSI seeks to address the question of 'whose are we' in its teaching on Acts 17:16-34. Key points from this passage help to explain God's transcendence and immanence and provide a glimpse of how transcendence and immanence inform FSI's pedagogy and practices as places of divine encounter. The apostle Paul's Athenian address as communicated by Luke confronts a biblically illiterate audience (Epicurean and Stoic philosophers) who possess a social imaginary that is different from the Christian story. Paul's context, like FSI's in dialogue with MTD, represents views of God that are contrary to who God is as revealed in Scripture. The first thing to note is that Paul establishes common ground when brought before the Areopagus with his observation that his hearers accepted piety manifested through their works of art an "extremely religious" disposition or yearning (Acts 17:22). He observes how a cultural artefact like an altar of worship with the inscription, "To an unknown God", demonstrates that they worship something, while Paul is also exasperated that this worship is a form of idolatry (v. 16). William Willimon (1988, pp. 142–43) asserts

that, “Idolaters they may be, but at least they are searching; their impulse to worship is right even if the objects of their worship are wrong”. Willimon further notes that their worship indicates inarticulacy and ignorance, while recognizing that “They at least know that something else is needed to make sense out of life, to give coherence to the world” (143). Paul operates from their flawed sense of worship as a bridge or pointer to transcendence and thus an opportunity to correct and properly direct them to the one true God. Paul proclaims to them monotheistic truths about God as Creator to clarify where their religious presuppositions are mistaken. Paul asserts that “God made the world and everything in it” and as creator, God is “Lord of heaven and earth” (Acts 17:24). William Kurz (2013, p. 271), in his commentary, argues that “This biblical understanding of creation means that God is not one being among other beings in the world. Rather, God is absolutely transcendent over all he has made, and the entire universe depends on him at every moment for its existence”. Paul presses God’s transcendence even more, when in vv. 24–25 he avers the impossibility that God can be domesticated to meet and serve human constructs as if God’s creatures give something to God because of some lack in God.

Second, Paul draws from his audience’s own literature when he states that, “In [God] we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). New Testament scholar Mikeal Parsons (2008, p. 247) observes that, “The triad of live, move, and exist underscores the fact that our very existence depends utterly and absolutely on God”. God’s presence in creation, and by extension cultural activities, means God is personally active. Returning to Kathryn Tanner’s understanding of the God–world relationship, what we see in Acts 17 is an example of “radicalizing” our conceptions of divine transcendence and immanence. The two attributes do not stand in contrast to one another for they are intrinsic to who God is. She argues (Tanner 1988, p. 46) that “a non-contrastive transcendence of God suggests an extreme of divine involvement with the world—a divine involvement in the form of productive agency extending to everything this is in an equally direct matter”. She concludes (46) that God’s immanence is a “source of being of every sort”. In agreement with Paul, everything is radically dependent on God who freely chooses to create and breathe life into all creatures (Acts 17:25).

If the Triune God is the ultimate source of meaning, purpose, and value, we do not need to frame God’s transcendence and immanence “contrastively”, as an either/or option. On the one hand, when we set up how God relates to creation in contrastive terms, the more we heavily weight God’s transcendence the more the weight tips for God to be “far away” and remote from creation as deism declares. We might appear to gain human agency and autonomy in fields of action like sports, though this contrast means God is uninvolved. On the other hand, if we make it solely about God’s immanence, this appears to move God closer to the point of being identified with nature, as seen in extreme forms like pantheism. Tanner challenges (46) the Christian theologian “to radicalize claims about both God’s transcendence and involvement with world if the two are to work for rather than against one another”.

8. Practicing the Presence of God: The Integration of God’s Transcendence and Immanence at FSI’s Retreat

When translated to the culture of sports, a deistic God sits in the stadium observing the contest as one among many who are in the audience, which follows the contrastive method. If pressed, a deistic God is probably more like a general manager or owner who makes the game possible. Yet God is not present in any purposeful or personal way since that is not God’s prescribed role in the drama of everyday activities, such as sports. Moreover, a deistic perspective falsely holds that after creation God withdrew because God built a natural order into the universe which then eliminates the need for God as sustainer and providential ruler.

In creaturely activities like sports. Christian athletes are invited to acknowledge their utter dependence on God the creator as wholly other, while at the same time, the attribute of transcendence does not compete with God’s equal attribute of being intimately and

closely involved in the affairs of God's cosmos. If God is both transcendent and immanent, the activity of sports can reveal and signal divine presence, for God communicates in and through material media (White 2018). In the immersion experience that follows this first teaching session on who God is, the retreatants with other FSI instructors transition to a ninety-minute lab where they are given a tool to reframe how they see God in their sport so that sports can be an opportunity for worship. In principle, FSI is reframing not only how youth see God as they cultivate theological skills to reflect on God, but also, because God's presence suffuses the world, we want youth to be aware of and learn to practice contemplatively God's presence in ordinary activities like sports.

Before explaining how the first lab speaks specifically to God's transcendence and immanence, a brief overview of how the labs work pedagogically needs to be outlined. As intimated above, FSI provides a mode of imagination with rituals that overcome the distance that often exists for youth between the spiritual, sensual, and affective engagement in and through things they love, such as sports. The big picture is for youth and leaders to reframe their experience of sports according to the Christian scriptures and tradition so that sport can become an act of worship, a site where participants practice the presence of God. The notion of practicing God's presence is derived in principle from Brother Lawrence's classic spiritual book *The Practice of the Presence of God*. He was a Carmelite Christian brother (1614–1691) who lived and worked in a monastery in Paris. As a cook in the kitchen, his spiritual foundation was "that he might perform all his actions for the love of God" at every moment as an address to God (Brother Lawrence 1939, p. 9). He understood God's holy presence as a simple attentiveness, sweet attachment, and general loving regard to God's actual presence, which, as a habit, takes delight in divine company, and "conversing with God continually" (6, 17). Prior to each lab, in an interactive TED-style talk, the students are presented with one of the five theological themes and virtues (faith, love, hope, discipline, and courage) that the lab instructors will then seek to examine through sport-specific experiments common to competition. These sport experiments expose and engage their thinking, feelings, and behaviors. Lab instructors look for various facial cues like surprise, absence, smiles, frowns, and agony while also attending with a "third ear" to listen and see with their eye's expressions of sad, mad, glad, and fear. "This is the Spirit of God giving voice to the trials and troubles that teens and adults communicate through facial expressions, hand gestures, and body posture" (Andrews and Smith 2015, p. 28). Each lab time manipulates a few specific variables (e.g., extrinsic motivation, failure, loss, cheering, booing, and winning) in the context of competition to help participants to sort how God encounters them and others in sports and life. Throughout the retreat, these experiments become increasingly disruptive and disorienting for participants to encourage them to inquire about and reflect on their own desires, attitudes about, behavior, motivations, and experiences of God, the self, and others. The goal is for participants to begin try on and adopt God's story by learning together and practicing specific disciplines in in the context of a safe, connected, and affirming community of mentors and staff.

In the first lab, the tool that we exercise as a ritual is named, "Sanctify this Field/Place" (see Andrews and Smith 2015, pp. 27–34). The use of the word "sanctify" refers to two related points regarding the basic sense of the word. First, in Scripture, to sanctify means to set apart, in that specific places are dedicated or devoted to God. Second, God's people are set apart since, as God's children, their new status means they belong to God. What this means when applied to our lab is that the physical and built environments of place of play and competition ultimately belong to God, as theologically explained above, regarding God's transcendence, as seen in Psalm 24. Sanctifying the field is a simple way to acknowledge God's transcendent authority and loving (immanent) presence concerning his rule and reign in mundane places like a field, pool, court, or a ski slope. Following Brother Lawrence, this ritual is "a little remembrance of God, one act of inward worship". (Brother Lawrence 1939, p. 19). As a sports-specific practice, youth get a chance to converse with and talk to God, "and referring all we do to him" (6). Appropriating Kenda Dean's thoughts, in *Practicing Passion* (Dean 2004, pp. 196–221), FSI applies what she calls transcendent

practices to “sanctifying this place”, for as a form of prayer, it cultivates “the art of awe”. Christian youth open themselves up to experiencing God’s movement in the here and now since our doctrine tells us that God is present and when God is there something “happens” (215). However, Dean cautions that God’s presence or movement is not something we can manufacture or own, but Dean does point out how attitudes of vulnerability, humility, and gratitude prepare youth “to catch fire in the nearness of God” (200). Dean describes these practices as gracious means that God uses “to condescend to us and ‘meet us where we are’...” (215). She argues that this thins the membrane between the sacred and profane allowing transcendent practices to “hear more clearly the Holy Spirit nudging them toward the passion of God”, transforming sports, as a form of play, into a moment of worship as expressed in our prayers and praise (207). Before the start of every lab, rather than keep God in the locker room when Christians often do pray perfunctorily before a game, we bring this transcendent practice to the courtside. We have the athletes stand outside the boundary line of the court/field and take a minute as a team to prepare their hearts and to prayerfully “invite” God onto the field with them before they step across the line to begin play. God is already there, but this a chance for them to consciously acknowledge and practice God’s presence and remember that God ultimately provides the place, athletic gifts, and other provisions for Christians to recreate and compete. This transcendent and immanent practice is not unlike saying grace before a meal. Like giving thanks before eating, it reflects the imaginary that humans are dependent on God who is the source of physical and spiritual life and thus this prayer is undertaken from gratitude for what God has given to Christians.

The Reformers used a motto that intersects this practice when they coined the phrase “*coram Deo*” which means “before the face of God”. Because of God’s transcendence and immanence, all areas of life are to be set apart and lived “before the face of God” with sports included as one of the theatres for God’s grace and glory. God is intimately involved in our sporting spaces because Christians confess that they live, move, play, and have their being in God. Consequently, MTD denies God’s personal ministry to and intimate presence with and for all that God creates, sustains, and moves toward God’s intended ends. Furthermore, when this dialectic between God’s transcendence and immanence is not properly understood, it immediately raises important questions for religious adolescents: Where is God in relation to sports and life? Does God care? In what ways does God interact with the persons and places of sports? FSI attempts to answer such questions during the retreat.

9. Conclusions

The aim of this paper has been to present an overview of the theological and pedagogical structures and practices of a Christian retreat for youth in order to chart some of the obstacles that often accompany spiritual formation for adolescents at the sport/faith interface. In particular, we have sought to provide an indication of the kinds of issues that young athletes might come up against when considering their faith amidst the cultural norms and values of modern-day competitive sports. As a (re)formatioal process, FSI seeks to counter the distance that often exists for youth between the spiritual, sensual, and affective engagement in and through things they love, such as sports. In this sense, it is the intention of the retreat to create an opportunity for youth (and leaders) to reframe their experiences of sports according to the Christian scriptures and tradition so that sporting pursuit can become an act of worship and a site where they practice the presence of God.

Throughout our discussion, we have sought to explain how the FSI retreat is proactively structured to challenge widely adopted views and assumptions around the complexion of modern-day sports, and the impact this can have on the ways in which Christian youth may perceive God and their relationship with Him. We recognise that such spiritual distractions and cross-pressures are not unique to youth (or in fact to sports), but we argue that because of the cultural tensions and pressures around sporting success at this age, a performance identity mind-set, emanating from the gravitational pull and endorsement of

the immanent frame in Secular 3, can easily infiltrate the lives of young athletes, thereby potentially distracting and compromising their faith and hindering their spiritual journey.

Drawing on the work of theologians and others, the paper has located the ‘problems’ of the adolescent sport/faith nexus within the context of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD), and has sought to demonstrate how the FSI retreat interrogates the theological nuances of this belief system whilst at the same time recalibrating the faith perspective of participants via a programme of experiential learning. The dialectic of God’s radical transcendence and immanence means that God has both authority over sports as Lord and is personally active and near to Christian youth as they refer their love of and movement in sports to the known God who, as their source of being, can be worshiped in and through sports and life. Sports can point to and practice the presence of God.

Whilst bespoke in its approach, we believe that our experiences and observations of the FSI retreat have implications for the wider Christian community, and in particular, for those with an interest in designing and hosting similar youth programmes. With a theologically driven approach to the integration of faith and sports, FSI’s retreat invites other programs to think critically and creatively about best practices and learning experiences that connect doctrine and life so that youth can receive an opportunity for divine encounters that bring fullness of meaning and value to them and glorify God.

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Notes

- ¹ FSI’s high school retreat has evolved and gone through multiple iterations over eight years (2016–2023) with several key collaborators and leaders who have strengthened and contributed to FSI’s shared vision. A subsequent sustainability grant of \$300,000 was received from Lilly Endowment in 2019. A special thanks is due to the sports ministry of Athletes in Action (AIA) for one of our authors was formerly on staff with AIA and he was inspired and influenced by AIA and contributed to aspects of their curriculum and Ultimate Training Camp. FSI’s retreat design, content, and pedagogies appropriated some of the best practices and insights from AIA while also theologically rehabilitating and revising its material in an academic university context for its research objectives and outcomes.
- ² Theologically, there are other interpretations of how God relates to the world (e.g., process theology, pantheism, process theology), however, these exceed the scope of this article’s analysis of MTD and other strands specific to God’s transcendence and immanence.
- ³ All our leaders read *How Youth Ministry Can Change Theological Education—If We Let It* as we theorized, designed, and developed our retreat pedagogy and curriculum with particular attention given to the educational theory that undergirds other high school youth theology initiatives.

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