

German Sport University Cologne

M.A. Olympic Studies

**The Importance of the Paralympic Movement for the
Maintenance and Development of the “*Religio Athletae*”
by Coubertin**

Author:

Ricardo Pantoja

Oriented by:

Prof. Dr. Stephan Wassong

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Introduction

In 1935, the Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the visionary father of the Olympic Games in the modern age, used the term “*Religio Athletae*” in his radio broadcast to compare the characteristics of Olympism which uses symbolism and ritualism to influence athletes and other Olympic stakeholders much like a religion uses similar elements to influence their believers (Coubertin, 1935). He was concerned about some aspects of the Olympic Movement that were resulting in growing nationalism and commercialism. However, he was creating a philosophical thinking with a difficult understanding for your main fellows of the journey, the own athletes (Müller, 2000). One year later for the Berlin 1936 Olympic Games and two years before his death, Coubertin used radio to explain the comparative idea of Olympism as a religion of sport in order to instill the democratic and internationalist essence of the Olympic Idea internalized by the Olympic Movement.

Thirteen years later in a small town in England, another visionary and brilliant neurosurgeon, Sir Ludwig Guttmann, created the Stoke Mandeville Games Festival for disabled people. This moment began a new journey of the Paralympic Movement. The world was starting to recovering from the second big war when it lived to the extreme some nationalist dictatorships. Guttmann, a Jewish German who escaped from Nazi Germany, created treatment methods that used sport to care for the ex-serviceman and woman who suffered from extreme injuries (Brittain, 2012). He viewed the practice of physical activities not only as a powerful tool to help these people in their rehabilitation, but also for the rehabilitation of the social and psychological needs of society (Bailey, 2008). Inspired by some Olympic symbols and rituals, Guttmann inserted them into his version of the games which spread enthusiasm and values within the Paralympic Movement.

By researching the history of the Olympic and Paralympic games and focusing on the lives and influences of the two visionaries who created both movements, Baron Pierre de Coubertin and Sir Ludwig Guttmann respectively, this essay shows the important role of the Paralympic Movement, created almost fifty years after the first Olympic Games, in the maintenance and development of the sport like a religion in the world. The method used for this research was Hermeneutics (Abulad, 2007) for systematic analysis and

facts interpretations of historical books and documents of the Olympic and Paralympic Movements.

The Religion and the Greece Antiquity

Since the beginning of human history, religion has played an important role in building society (Berger, 1967). There are some theories which explain the origin of word “religion”. However, the etymology most popular among modern writers derives from latin word “*religare*”, which means connection and obligation to divinity. In other words, religion is a link between man and a superior divine power, who have an established relationship and a sense of dependency (Samoré, 1978). Religions are defined as complex systems of theory and practice (Audi, 1999), which have elements to support the maintenance of their identity and influence in society. Some important elements are the symbols and rituals which have a more lasting power than only their explanatory doctrinal forms because they speak to the imagination and to human emotion. These elements are perceived as tangible representations of a sacred essence and bring the real presence of the religious dimension into the lives of those who experience them and in so doing become incredibly precious (Eliade, 1987).

Religion occupied a central place in the life of ancient societies. In Greece, the cradle of Olympic Games, it was no different. To the Greeks, the practice of religion was not infrequent or supplemental. Rather, it permeated every part of their daily lives (Sailors, 2007). Before 776 BC, the traditional founding of the Ancient Olympic Games, Olympia was a sanctuary where festivals dedicated to the gods with religious ritualism and symbolism took place (Demirel, Yildiram, 2013). The athletic competitions had been added to these festivals to entertain worshippers like a sacrificial tribute to the gods. Before the festival, the athletes swore to Zeus to respect the rules of the Games, and those who didn't uphold them had to pay fines which were used to create statues that were placed on the sanctuary to remind people of the shame of cheating (Murray, 2014). The success of Olympic athletes brought inspirational values to not only his the community, such as the ritual of sharing a common meal at the end of festival (Reid, 2006), and societal harmony, represented by the pacification brought by a sacred truce or “Ekecheiria” proclaimed before the games that offered safe passage through any

states to arrive and depart the games (Kyle, 2014). These facts show the educative power of sport which was used by religion, not only in the maintenance of its doctrines and influence, but also as a tool to share values with all of society.

The Sport Religion in the Origin of Olympic and Paralympic Movement

When restoring the Olympic Games at the end of the 19th century, Coubertin believed they should have the same religious spirit embodied by the games in ancient Greece. However, this ideal which was well understood by the ancient Greeks needed to be explained to the people of his day and would later be realized (Jirásek, 2015). The comparative terminology of the sport as a religion used by Coubertin has indicators which always appear in his actions and publications. The basis of this idea may have formed during his education at the Jesuit Collège St. Ignace where he expressed enthusiasm for Greek legacy, the Games of Antiquity (Muller, 2000), and how religiosity and sport provided a great experience for all (Kyle, 2014).

However, the peak of Coubertin's philosophy was when he used one of his more controversial and misunderstood terms, the "*Religio Athletae*", which first appeared in 1928 as the title for his publication in de *Bulletin du Bureau International de Pedagogie Sportive* (Mechikoff, Sullivan, 2008). He continued to develop this ideology until his famous radio broadcast in Lausanne, 1935. In both cases, Coubertin not only explains the idea of Olympism but also elaborates on the idea of maintaining and sharing its values. Also in these instances, he deeply criticised how the Olympism was being used inside and outside of the movement. Coubertin didn't seek to establish Olympism as a religion in the traditional sense, but to infuse it with religious meaning and demand a commitment to this philosophy of "moral education, international peace, artistic beauty and physical effort" (Mechikoff, Sullivan, 2008). This idea was later adopted by Avery Brundage, when he was President of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), where he proclaimed that Olympism was a twentieth-century religion, "a religion with universal appeal which incorporates all the basic values of other religions, a modern, exciting, virile, dynamic religion" (Brundage, 1964).

The origin of the Paralympic Movement has more scientific beginnings than the philosophical and historical foundations of the Olympics. It began by Guttmann in 1944 as part of a process for the rehabilitation of patients with spinal injuries when he established the Stoke Mandeville Spinal Injuries Unit in Aylesbury, England (Roberts, 2012). Before that, society and even the medical community still held the archaic concept popular with ancient Egyptians and Greeks, which stated that spinal cord damage can not to be treated, therefore, people with such injuries need to be excluded for any remunerative work (Goodman, 1986). Guttmann developed new surgical methods and innovative treatments to help these people, as well as the concepts which he called the “basic principles of this new philosophy” which sought to return people with disabilities to a normal life “as useful and respected citizens in the community” (Guttmann, 1952).

Guttmann grew up in a family that observed most of the religious rites and symbolism of Judaism. However, they were neither fanatics nor orthodox. He was born in 1899 in the small German city of Tost, which is in modern day Poland (Goodman, 1986). In 1918 when he matriculated at the Medical Faculty of Breslau University in Poland, Guttmann joined a Jewish Fraternity which was affiliated with an organization called the Kartell-Convent. These fraternities were formed for patriotic German Jews who inspired confidence among their members through the sport activities in face of growing anti-semitism in German (Grenville, 2012). In 1919, Guttmann was going to University of Freiburg where he had joined another Jewish fraternity and practiced fencing, his favourite sport (Goodman, 1986). After completing his doctorate, he returned to Breslau in 1924 where he became a leading neurosurgeon working in hospitals in this region and was well renowned throughout Germany. He was there until he escaped to England in 1939 when it was no longer safe for him in Germany. Nevertheless, he never forgot this period because he discovered the power of sport in overcoming adversities and it was where he met his wife and mother of his children, Else Samuel.

After years of danger and fear in Germany, Guttmann’s family lived as refugees in England but with safety in a tolerant and democratic society (Goodman, 1986). He later worked in Oxford where he developed innovative treatment methods for patients with

spinal injuries that included movement and activity for both their physical and mental rehabilitation, and as a result he was invited to put his ideas into practice in a new spinal injury unit that was to be established in Stoke Mandeville in 1944 (Bailey, 2008). With the development of these treatment methods using sports as the main tool, in July 29, 1948, the first Stoke Mandeville Games took place with 16 competitors, all paralysed ex-servicemen wounded in the Second World War. For the first competition, a Stoke Mandeville Team competed against the Star and Garter Home team from Richmond in archery, both teams dressed in shirts embroidered with their respective team's badge (Brittain, 2012). Because the first games for athletes with disabilities happened on the same day of the Opening Ceremony of XIV Olympic Games in London, Guttman establish an important link with the Olympic Movement (Guttman, 1949). Although Guttman explained that both games starting on the same day was merely coincidental, it was an indicator that he planned for the first Stoke Mandeville Games to borrow some of the symbolism from the Olympic Games (Bailey, 2008). Since that day, the Stoke Mandeville Games was conducted annually, and there was an exponential increase in the number of athletes, competing organizations and institutions.

Symbolism and Ritualism to Maintain the Sport Religion

Elements of life experience manifest themselves in the form of symbols which remain in the unconscious indefinitely, sometimes forever (Alkemeyer, Richartz, 1993). In the Olympism Idea, Coubertin replaced the godheads of the ancient Greek Games with modern idols. In modern Olympic competitions the athlete would exalt "his country, his race, his flag" (Coubertin, 1935). Right from the start, Coubertin's Olympic Games embodied a social program translated into images and heightened emotions (Alkemeyer, Richartz, 1993). Inspired by this religious symbolism and ritualism, this created some important elements for the Olympic Movement, such as the Olympic Flag, Olympic Oath, Sacred Flame, Open and Closing Ceremonies, Medal Ceremonies and Olympic Motto.

Since the first Stoke Mandeville Games for disabled athletes, the symbolism and rituals from Olympic Games were used. In 1949, when the winners started to receive prizes of cups and medals as symbols of their victory, Guttman gave a speech in which he

claimed that the Stoke Mandeville Games would soon become recognised as the paraplegic's equivalent of the Olympic Games (Britain, 2012). In 1952, the Games really became an international sporting event for paraplegics when a Dutch team of paralysed members came to England to compete (IPC, 2012). In addition to the new sports and the growing number of participating nations, each year new elements were added to the games identify, such as a flag in 1953 and the "Parade of Nations" in 1954, both references to and a use of Olympic symbols and rituals (Britain, 2012).

After important discussions between Guttmann and the representative of the World Veteran's Federation and the Director of the Spinal Centre at Ostia in Rome, it was agreed that the Stoke Mandeville Games in 1960 would be held in Rome shortly after the Olympic Games which were happening in the same city (Britain, 2012). When Guttmann had a private audience with Pope John XXIII on the occasion of the Olympic Games in Rome, the Pope exclaimed with emotion to Sir Ludwig: "You are the de Coubertin of the Paralysed" (Scruton, 1979). Not only was it the first time the games were held outside of England, but they also became known as the "First Paralympic Games". It was the first time disabled athletes reached Olympic recognition (Scruton, 1998). Four years later, the Paralympic Games were held in the same Olympic host city, Tokyo. Again the symbolism and ritualism of the Olympic Games were used, including different logos for each game and the athlete's oath. Furthermore, the motto of these Olympic Games was used in Paralympic Games too: "The World United in One". After the Tokyo Games, Guttmann created a new emblem for the International Stoke Mandeville Games with three interlocking wheels even though the similarity to the Olympic rings was evident and would be an issue in the future (Bailey, 2008). However, for next five Olympic Games (from 1968 to 1984), it was not possible to have the games in the same host city for a number of reasons, but using similar Olympic Games' rituals and symbols had already been an important part of the life of the International Stoke Mandeville Games, Paralympic organizations, and mainly to disabled athletes who recognised the respect for these elements which made the movement stronger.

In Seoul 1988, the games received the official designation of the Paralympic Games and used the same competition venues as the Olympic Games. For these Games, a new

logo was created and one year later with the foundation of the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) became the official logo of the organization. This symbol was an issue between the IPC and IOC, because of the similarity with the IOC logo (Rio 2016, 2014). This issue continued until 1992 when the IPC had become a “Recognised Organization” by the IOC and a new logo was created with three elements representing the new motto: “Mind, Body, Spirit”. This logo remained in use until the closing ceremony of the 2004 Athens Paralympic Games, where a new logo of the International Paralympic Committee was presented with three elements called “Agitos” following a new motto: “Spirit in Motion”. This represented a drive to compete and to succeed, and it symbolized that the Paralympic Movement is truly moving forward (IPC, 2015a). Certainly using the religious term "spirit" indicated a perfect harmony with the term "spirit" used in the fourth Fundamental Principle of Olympism in the Olympic Charter where the practice of sport is treated as a human right without any discrimination (IOC, 2016).

Conclusion

For Coubertin, sport was a religion with a place for worship with dogmas to be followed and services to share values for all, but above all, it was a feeling of mutual respect and commitment to society (Muller, 2000). The mutual respect referred to a respect for tradition as well as respect for religion, for conventions, for individuals and for the culture of human conscience. He defines terms such as faith, tolerance, and mutual respect, explaining that one single faith valid for everyone can never be achieved in modern society (Diem, 1986). This doctrine of mutual respect cannot be written in the same way laws can because it does not have precise rules, but a mental attitude which needs to be spread throughout society (Coubertin, 1915).

Mutual respect is one of the most important values inside the Olympic Movement because it shows the capacity of sport to reduce problems concerning discrimination based on race or religion. However, inside the Paralympic Movement this social capacity is inclusive of the physical, psychological and social rehabilitation of people with disabilities. Until 1944, disabled people had a life expectancy of only two or three years (Bailey, 2008). After, not only was their life extended, but they were also able to reclaim

their dignity and be accepted in society. This demonstrated the inclusive power of sport that is deeply rooted in the Paralympism.

Behind the scientific origin of the Paralympic Movement, history revealed that the existence of the Olympic values were intrinsic to the Paralympic Movement and used the same religious approach with symbols and rituals. In 2003, the International Olympic Committee and the International Paralympic Committee began to work together not only to organize and deliver the Games in the same city, but also in projects involved in education and social inclusion (Gilbert, Schantz, 2008). Although they are different organizations with their own visions and objectives, this integrated support does not demonstrate two different philosophies of the Olympism Idea by Coubertin, but rather one unique sport religion in the world.

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