

Religiosity, Health and Participation in Sports

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ABSTRACT

This research study was conducted to evaluate and review the existing literature encircling the ambit of religion with reference to participation in sports and health from the psychological perspective. Religion and humans have long been associated and religion has been playing very prominent role in the everyday lives of human beings. Internal peace, eternal satisfaction and contentment are the associated outcomes of attachment with the religion particularly in the event of negative and stressful circumstances. A number of studies endorse the relationship between religion and positive mental and physical health. Literature encircling sports psychology suggests that religious trend of the player can have positive effect upon the overall mental health and performance of the player. Religious practices and gestures in shape of praying are the routine activities particularly before and during competition, among the athletes representing different religious schools of thoughts. Relationship of religiosity and sports have also been looked into from the historical perspectives and one thing became clear that, in the ancient days, sports activities were performed as a part of religious rituals and faith obligatory practices to please their gods/goddesses. Sport activities like running, jumping, boxing, bow-shooting, fighting, javelin throw, discus throw and wrestling had been used to be performed as a sacred religious duty on special periodical ceremonies conducted regularly. Findings of the different studies show that religiosity plays significant role in averting the stressful situation, coping sports related anxiety of the participants and enhancing confidence and self-esteem of the player.

Keywords: Anxiety, Coping, Stress, Health, Performance, Player, Religiosity, Sports.

INTRODUCTION

Religion and humans have long been associated and religion has been playing very prominent role in the everyday lives of human beings. Internal peace, eternal satisfaction and contentment are the associated outcomes of attachment with the religion particularly in the event of negative and stressful circumstances (Koenig, 2012; Peres et al., 2007). In literature, there is no universally acceptable definition of religion. In most cases religion comprises of the system of belief and practices. The term religion stems back from the two different Latin words; "Religio", referring to the code of respect for the holy and sacred things, and the other one "Religare", signifying the state of binding in terms of obligation for doing specific practices. Religion is belief-oriented phenomenon related to one's faith in shape of spiritual affirmation associated with divine supernatural power. In common perspectives religion is a combination of faith and belief based self-imposed code of ethics for respecting and obeying supernatural power. (Fasching and de Chant 2001). Religious faith and practices play significant role in the

lives of the believers (Pargament et al., 2017). Religion is the spiritual relationship of human with the God or gods or the like other mystic powers differing from religion to religion. To please the heavenly spirit and to seek his favour in the everyday life and; according to Muslim and Christian mythology; in the second life to follow after death; following the religious way of life, obeying the code of social living in line with the religious principles and fulfilling the religious obligations, doing religious practices are the key components to have a successful life. Religious life comprises of accepting and observing religious code in all deeds of everyday activities, leading pure and honest life, fulfilling the religious obligation and doing worship are the prerequisites of religion. In religion all the ethics, norms, values, morals, principles and codes of social life are embedded in the comprehensive concept of faith and belief.

The world population has been on rise at a speed of 1.1% per year (Gerland et al., 2014). Present population of the world on February 08, 2024, according to the "Worldmeters.info", comprised of 8,090,062,104

persons (World Population Clock: 7.9 billion People (2023) - Worldometer, n.d.) and it is estimated that by 2057 it will cross the 10 billion persons' mark (World Population Prospects, 2022). Around 63% of the world's population follow one or the other religion, 22% don't follow any religion whereas 11% of the global population is atheists and they claim to be the nonbeliever (Keysar, 2015). According to a careful estimate, there are around 450 to 500 million followers of Atheism making 7% of the world's population (Keysar et al., 2017). So, for as the question of the number of the believers of different religions is concerned, they differ from one another. There are five main religions in the world, Christianity has 2.3 billion believers, followed by Islam having 1.8 billion followers, Hinduism 1.1 billion, Buddhism 0.5 billion and Jewish mythology has 15.7 million followers making 31%, 24%, 15%, 6.9% and 0.2% of the world population respectively (Johnson et al., 2017). In addition to that, Folk religion also have 0.4 billion believers making 5.7% of the world population. An aggregate of 84% of the global population is reported to have been included in the ambit of religion (Trothen & Tracy, 2018). In Minoan mythology, the games having involvement of the animals like bulls were regarded as the symbol of fertility, health and power and were used as a source to please their goddess sun (Shapland, 2013).

NATURE AND CONCEPT OF SPORTS

The nature of sport has been, either competitive or recreative having its own code of ethics, rules of business and framework of practices. Sport has nothing with religiosity rather it has been a non-religious human activity normally carried on voluntarily. Sport is perhaps the sole human activity having potential of attracting maximum population of the world at a given time. However, sport may be a gentle and sacred religious activity for someone on the bases of religion (Ashraf, 2018). Psychologically speaking, the essence of playing is resent in the very nature of humans and it is the innate passion of man to do something different, from what he has been doing as imposed responsibility or obligation, which is known as sports. As the name itself indicates, sport refers to the activity exhibiting skill, specialty, strength, agility, flexibility and speed all of which are embedded in shape of performance. Sport is the most feasible, practical and natural way of getting recreation and relief from the routine busy life as a competitor and simultaneously offering recreational opportunities to hundreds of thousands as the spectators. Participation in sport promotes a number of social and psychological attributes like justice, equality, fraternity, understanding, unity, tolerance, and sense of responsibility. Sporting activities uphold the values, morals, ethics and social norms of the society whereas

religion also does the same job. Laar et al. (2019a) also endorse the same stance stating that sports maintain the religious values like fairness, impartiality, spirit of hardworking, commitment, determination and character building.

RELIGION AND HEALTH

Literature also endorses the association between health and religious affiliation (Laar et al., 2019b). Similarly, religious individuals have satisfaction with life, leading contented and better quality of life; and face less psychological and emotional issues like stress, depression, anxiety and social maladjustment in comparison to those having less religious affiliation Watson, (Nick et al., 2013.) In recent years, exploring the relationship between the religiosity and emotional satisfaction has attained considerable attention of the researchers. In the same context, Koenig (2012) and Peres et al. (2007) have documented that religious practices provide base of satisfaction enabling the person to better cope with the hectic and stressful situations of the everyday life. Religious realm may prove to be a source of relief and calmness for the ones suffering from mental issues (Pargament & Kenneth, 2013). A number of studies endorse the relationship between religion and positive mental and physical health. Koenig and Harold (2012) correlate low mortality rate among those having more religious affiliation and frequent involvement in the religious activities. Overall religious activities have positive effect on physical health and lifestyle of the participants (Seybold & Hill, 2001). Confirming the same findings Koenig and Vaillant (2009) have documented that religious activities promote physical health. Since religions follow healthy and pious practices therefore it results in good health. It is documented that religious practices improves the immune system and render the person comparatively safe from the provides protection cardiovascular diseases Seeman et al., 2003). Joshanloo et al. (2015) have confirmed that people having more religious affiliation happen to have been more efficient in coping with health issues, have better mental health as compared to th the less religious ones. Religiosity leads towards clear mentality, pious thinking and positive physical health (Bradshaw et al., 2022).

RELIGION AND PARTICIPATION IN SPORTS

Religion has, in fact, more dominantly a spiritual affiliation and devotion of a person having certain school of thoughts. As a matter of common observation, firm believers normally seek the remedy of their spiritual, psychological and emotional issues in the religious deeds. Religious practices have very significant role in the everyday life of the followers in integrating the mind,

body and soul. In the field of sports particularly at the elite level, in most cases, sports performance, stress and anxiety are considered as the part and parcel of the game. Fear of injury & illness, expectation of the family and coach, pressure of competition, tough training schedule, difficulty in time management and poor performance often work as the causative factor behind the stress and anxiety of the player.

Belief in religion provides stability and strength to the player in terms of coping the adverse and challenging stressful environment and showing their real performance in the field of action (Watson & Nesti, 2005). Praying is the basic religious practice requesting the God (god) for better result and avoiding the worse and its role is established in averting stress and anxiety and showing stable sports performance (Czech & Bullet, 2007). Players having religious inclinations normally seek divine favor for coping the challenging situation, overcoming the difficulties, subsiding the tense environment and managing stressful circumstances (Oman et al., 2018). Irrespective of the game and regardless of the affiliation to any specific religion, player can be seen in any part of the world in praying gesture seeking divine's favor for alleviating and resolving their problems. Ashraf (2018) has documented that religious players believe in the act of praying in terms of divine support in solving performance related issues like stress and anxiety, showing good sports performance and having success in the field. Since ancient times, playing and praying have been moving side by side and they both have been existing together (Trothen & Tracy, 2018). Irrespective of the religious affiliation, sport has been one of the socially accepted activities in different cultures. Honoring the religious demand; particularly from the Islamic school of thoughts; a code of ethics and norms are required to be followed equally well in all sports throughout the world.

Participation in sport activities for both male and female is not discouraged by Islam (Miles and Benn, 2016). Dress code is the primary restriction which is required to be followed by the participants of the sport activity. Joint playing, open interaction of male and female during sports activities, supervision and officiating of the female sports activities by the male officials is the next code of conduct in sports. Similarly, honoring particular days of worship, religious rituals and festival is also among the code for the conduct of sports activities.

Buddhists believe in the psychological and physical aspect of sports in perspectives of unity, understanding, cohesion and good health (Noh & Shahdan, 2020). Buddha declares health as the highest gain for humans and instructed the Nuns and Monks (Religious leaders responsible for the

preaching and preservation of the Buddha's ideology) to promote health through active way of life (Von Hinüber, 1995).

In Christianity, fair sport is supported for upholding the God will to promote justice to prevail in the society. It has now been a common observation that church earnestly supports sports activities as a potential means to maintain the work of "the Lord" (McClendon, 2012). In everyday experiences, it has been established that religion uses sport for its own ends through sports institutions, sports leaders, church and other sports bodies (Cailliau, 2013). A number of international institutions and associations like Catholic Youth Organization (CYO), Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) have been functional for the integration and mutual promotion between sport and religion (Boateng et al., 2018).

In Jewish mythology, there exists diverse views and difference of opinion among the masses in perspectives of participation in sports. Participation in sports is in fact the compliance of the religious duty to maintain balance between mind and body (Yoma 85b, a Babylonian Talmud). In addition to that, participation in sports can promote unity, self-control spirit of justice and affection. Another school of thought claims that participation in sports deals with the person's own will and discretion and it has nothing to do with the religious obligations. Similarly, people following Shabbat (Sabbath) observance, which does not allow any special work or activity and traveling on Saturday, may pose hindrance towards participation in sports (Helman, 2008).

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES OF RELIGION AND SPORTS

Evaluating ancient history of sports, one thing becomes clear that, in the ancient days, sports activities were performed as a part of religious rituals and faith obligatory practices to please their gods/goddesses. Sport activities like running, jumping, boxing, bow-shooting, fighting, javelin throw, discus throw and wrestling had been used to be performed as a sacred religious duty on special periodical ceremonies conducted regularly (Avery, 2014). In addition to different sport competitions, Hong et al. (2018) have documented that dance was also performed as a religious act in different civilizations. Evidence shows that the sport of Fighting is probably the oldest sport activity tracing back to 2700 BC (Oman et al., 2018). Documented history confirms the association of sports and games with humanity which stems back to the ancient Greece era of 776 BC in shape of ancient Olympic Games (Twietmeyer, 2018). During those early days, sports

activities had been conducted not for the sake of winning or outdoing the rival rather for pleasing the gods/goddesses. Games were used to be held as religious ceremonies in the honour of different gods. Literature confirms that conduct of the ancient Olympic Games had been celebrated in the honour of the goddess Zeus and goddess Hera as a religious demonstration (Mikalson, 2005). In these games girls used to participate in race with open-hair which was a special event conducted for the happiness of the goddesses (Pausanias, 2006). Similarly, another series of sports festival called Nemea Games were also conducted under the religious umbrella with the same motive to please the goddess Zeus. Furthermore, Panhellenic games having religious context held at Delphi had also been used to commemorate the victory and pay tributes to god Apollo who was believed to kill the dragon Python. In addition to overcome challenging and threatening everyday issues, Greeks used to call for the godly assistance to dominate in sports performance (Shapland, 2013). In this context assistance of the goddess Athena, who was supposed to support humanity in terms of guidance, granting insight and making wise decision.

PRAYING IN SPORTS

Religious practices and gestures in shape of praying are the routine activities particularly before and during competition, among the athletes representing different religious schools of thoughts. During praying the athlete tries to show their belongingness and affiliation with the supernatural power (God/gods) and seeks their blessings and sanctification. In the event of tough and challenging competition, stress, anxiety, tension and apprehension are the routine psychological states of the athletes, and the athletes using the mediation of praying strive for heavenly support in terms of positive outcome in performance. On the bases of religion, the way of praying practices of the athletes from one religious mythology may differ from the other. It has also been observed that, in many cases, the nature and frequency of praying remain proportional to the level and significance of sports competition (Oman & Doug, 2018). However, there also exists conflicting views regarding the role of prayer in sports and the act of seeking help from God/supernatural powers. Declaring prayer in sports against the true spirit of sports competition Kreider (2003) claims that seeking assistance from God/supernatural powers is the same as asking someone outsider for assistance who is not part of the game. And this type of activity needs to be taken as the unfair favor of the praying player. In views of the author, it is immoral and tantamount as a type of cheating, therefore it should be avoided. On the other hand, Joshanloo et al. (2015) argue that in sports majority of the competitors pray for their safety, avoidance of injury, stress and not for their

domination in performance. So far as the employment of a religious activity or gesture is concerned, prayer the most frequently used activity employed in the field of sports. Lee (2004) has concluded that prayer is perhaps the religious activity that can be found in all levels of sports right from local to elite and professional level.

DISCUSSION

This review of the existing literature highlights the mutual relationship between religiosity, health, and sports. Religion and its association with health and sports has been among the most attractive topics in sports psychology. During ancient times, most sports activities were included as part of the religious realm, exemplified by the ancient Olympic Games. Religious gestures, prayers directed to God as a meditation source are followed by players, particularly from Christianity, Judaism, and Islam (Watson & Nesti, 2005).

On the other hand, players representing Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and other Eastern philosophies typically follow meditative techniques focusing on relaxation, deep breathing, breath control, and cooling down to cope with stress, anxiety, and other worries associated with sports (Parker & Watson, 2015). Regarding Islam, religion has a profound and direct impact on the life patterns, daily activities, and lifestyles of Muslims (Laar et al., 2019b).

Findings of this review suggest a close relationship among the three variables of the study: religiosity, health, and sports. Religion plays a significant role in the everyday life of a player, particularly in coping with various situations such as reducing stressful sentiments, anxiety, fear of competition, and avoiding mishaps before, during, and after competitions in terms of illness, injury, or accidents. Religiosity provides satisfaction to players by averting mishaps, injuries, or illnesses, thus improving their sports performance. By boosting confidence and motivation, it helps players better cope with adverse and challenging situations like stress, anxiety, and competition fears. Both religion and sports strive for mutual harmony, unity, and understanding among their practitioners, leading to a prosperous and successful nation.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the interplay between religiosity, health, and sports demonstrates the profound influence of religion on an individual's physical and psychological well-being. Religiosity offers coping mechanisms that aid athletes in managing stress, anxiety, and competition pressures. The integration of religious practices in sports

not only enhances performance but also fosters a sense of community, unity, and mutual understanding. This comprehensive relationship underscores the importance of considering religious factors when examining the holistic development and well-being of athletes. Consequently, fostering an environment that respects and incorporates diverse religious practices can contribute to the overall success and prosperity of sports and society as a whole.

DECLARATION

Authors' Contribution Statement: Mohibullah Khan Marwat was Principal author, led the research design, data collection, and manuscript preparation. Samera Saman was Assisted in data collection and contributed to the drafting and final approval of the manuscript. Huang Liang Contributed to data analysis and provided critical revisions to the manuscript.

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