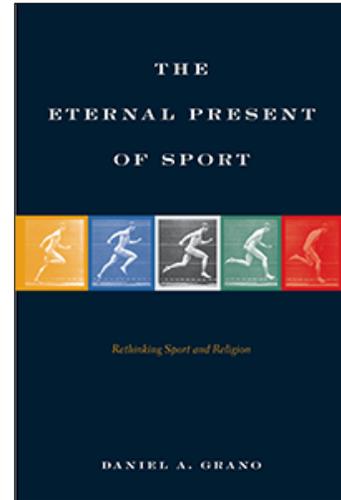


Daniel A. Grano, **The Eternal Present of Sport: Rethinking Sport and Religion**, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2017, 269 pp., \$34.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Elysia Galindo-Ramirez
Pennsylvania State University, USA

Sports and religion have been talked about for a long time in various different ways. To some, sports and religion are forces that once worked in conjunction, but in the modern era, they have grown apart, leaving sport without a crucial moral compass and, consequently, without the positive social influence it once held (Baker, 2007). To others, sport has eclipsed religion, becoming, in some places, an “opiate of the masses,” which helps to uphold oppressive power structures and social norms (Bain-Selbo, 2009). Daniel A. Grano’s **The Eternal Present of Sport** is a new entry into this conversation, driven by the desire to “rethink sport-religion relationships in dialectical terms” (p. 1). Over six chapters in which a diverse blend of theory (most prominently theology and cultural theory) are melded with case studies of contemporary “elite televised sport,” Grano advances a carefully crafted argument about this relationship. His argument is that in the current moment, key religious (or, as Grano prefers to use, “theological”) elements of elite televised sport are beginning to have inherent conflicts within them become visible and that these conflicts represent an opportunity through which theology could in fact challenge and potentially unseat long-standing sport institutions and commonly held assumptions about elite media sport. Stated explicitly and expressed implicitly throughout the text is a sense that Grano’s writing is the product of a moment in time where elite televised sport has a seemingly ever-increasing number of potential points of rupture and that this text is a call to not waste this moment.



Grano does all of this in consistently careful, methodical language. Within each chapter, a considerable amount of time is devoted to reviewing what has been covered, clarifying what he sees as the central takeaways, and highlighting what he does not see as guaranteed or necessarily likely outcomes from these takeaways. With the stated desire of avoiding the sort of polarized positions that have long dominated scholarship on sports and religion, this is a particularly well-chosen tact. Across six chapters (including an introduction and conclusion), Grano uses various sports and issues within elite televised sport to build a case for an increasing number of potential points of rupture.

To do this, Grano begins with an introductory chapter that is largely devoted to providing readers with the necessary theoretical tool kit to follow his arguments. Perhaps most crucial in this is the notion of negative theology—a strain of theological thought that seeks to counter binary notions of things, such as the sacred and the profane, and, through this, to potentially detach “religious images, tropes, and objects from their institutional appropriations and [mobilize] them against the very notions of historical progress they have upheld” (p. 14). The four chapters in the middle focus on different areas or elements of elite televised sport—sports histories (primarily as constructed within/by the National Football League [NFL]), the adoption of and impact of live replay technologies, technological doping (a discussion that focuses

heavily on the notion of cyborgs and the human–technology divide), and the brain injury crisis within the NFL—and all have a similarly methodical structure: introduction of the issue and its potential implications, more in-depth examinations of various aspects of the issue at hand, and a conclusion pulling case study and theory (which is sprinkled throughout these chapters) together. The concluding chapter uses a discussion of the increasing tensions surrounding the notion of amateurism within college sports, particularly basketball and football, to set the stage for a series of final theses about the relationship between elite televised sport and religion/theology. These theses are the boldest, most direct writing within the book and where Grano gets most explicit about both the promise and limitations of the current moment within elite televised sport.

Grano (reflecting the cultural studies tradition from which he frequently draws) addresses scholars and activists in the concluding chapter, urging both (nonmutually exclusive) groups to take advantage of this current moment. However, it should be noted that due to the considerable amount of theory used, the text itself is not particularly friendly to mass audiences. As an academic text, *The Eternal Present of Sport* should find strong appeal among qualitative scholars interested in sports in the West. Those focused on sports communication, history, and/or the body may find it to be an especially rewarding read. Additionally, this text would be worth keeping in mind when constructing reading lists for graduate coursework. For emerging scholars, Grano's highly organized writing style and his integration of theory and case study could present an ideal accompaniment to more purely theoretical readings on the same or related issues.

On the whole, *The Eternal Present of Sport* is a strong, well-composed, and unique contribution to the study of sport. It is not perfect, and in a journal such as this, the fact that Grano focuses almost exclusively on U.S.-based, English-language televised sport must be acknowledged as a key limitation. Of course, this is not to say the situations Grano chose to focus on are inappropriate or overly myopic; rather, they represent some of the most prominent debates and controversies within elite televised sport in recent years. With an unhurried and methodical tone, Grano also does an excellent job of explaining and deepening these stories, many of which readers will likely have already seen discussed by sports journalists.

It is perhaps this level of detail and clarity that makes it especially frustrating that Grano's discussion largely leaves women's sport out of the picture. While it is true that elite women's sport gets less coverage than men's (Cooky, Messner, & Musto, 2015), not every area of sport that he discusses is quite as monolithic as the NFL or inherently more popular than the most popular elite televised women's sport. Further, with chapter 4 dealing with notions of transhumanism and with Grano explicitly drawing on Donna Haraway's theory of the cyborg, this oversight feels especially glaring. Haraway described the cyborg as "a creature in a post-gender world" (2006, p. 104), and while gender may not be Grano's focus within the chapter, to claim that there is a point of rupture emerging around the boundary between humans/athletes and technology and to not address whether or not this is true for both male and female elite televised sport in a real way is a significant oversight within an otherwise excellently written chapter.

Grano's tone has been mentioned multiple times in this write-up, and this is simply because it is one of the book's greatest strengths. Chapter 4, despite the aforementioned issues, represents an exceptionally clear and easy-to-understand explanation of transhumanism and the ongoing debates over performance enhancement and technological enhancements within sport. The theory Grano is working with is hardly simple, and through a combination of breadth (at 41 pages, it is by far the longest chapter) and

well-chosen case studies, he does a great deal to make them more grounded and accessible. It is this writing style that allows Grano to largely pull off the concluding chapter, which, while the shortest in the book, has one of the longest to-do lists, introducing both a new case study (that of amateurism in college sports) and a series of theses intended to sum up the most important points from the previous five chapters.

The Eternal Present of Sport is not without its limitations, and it will not be the final text focused on the relationship between religion and sport. However, in the present moment, it is ultimately an engaging and worthwhile look into a moment of building questions within elite media sport and a well-reasoned argument for why there could in fact be some level of revolutionary potential within all of this. The vision presented for this is complicated and, continuing the mission Grano began the book with, deeply resistant to easy categorizations. Throughout the text and most obviously within the conclusion, Grano builds a case with qualifications because, as he states in the conclusion, the most likely potential outcome of these points of rupture is neither complete destruction and replacement nor the entirely uncontested, continuing domination of the organizations and assumptions facing these ruptures (p. 205). Rather, what emerges from these situations is likely to be a mixed bag and one that can only be more closely wrestled with when scholars move away from long dominant, binary understandings of the sport and religion relationship.

References

- Bain-Selbo, E. (2009). *Game day and God: Football, faith, and politics in the American South*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press.
- Baker, W. J. (2007). *Playing with God: Religion and modern sport*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cooky, C., Messner, M. A., & Musto, M. (2015). "It's dude time!" A quarter century of excluding women's sports in televised news and highlights show. *Communication and Sport*, 3(3), 261–287.
- Haraway, D. (2006). A cyborg manifesto: Science, technology, and socialist-feminism in the late twentieth century. In S. Stryker & S. Whittle (Eds.), *The transgender studies reader* (pp. 103–118). New York, NY: Routledge.