

Conference round-up: ‘Sport, spirit of humanity’

Brussels, 6 October 2016



Within the framework of the second edition of the Festival of Films on Sport¹, the Parliament of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation organised a conference that brought together religions recognised by the Belgian state, in order to discuss the overlap of sport with religion.

M. Philippe Courard, *President of the Parliament of the Federation of Wallonia-Brussels*, gave an introductory speech, in which he called for the upholding of positive values such as inclusion through sport, which is an important vector for union within our societies. Sport and Citizenship agrees with Courard’s depiction of sport as a

welcoming ground for any person, of whichever religious belief, and adds that this is especially crucial today for the integration of migrants.²

M. Louis Derwa, *jurist and administrator of the Panathlon of Wallonia-Brussels*, gave a follow-up introduction, in which he referred to Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympic Games, who emphasised the universality of Sport: it encompasses the values of loyalty, fair play, respect, effort and transcendence.

‘What about Christian missionary Eric Idell’s refusal to compete in the 1924 Olympic Games, because of his race taking place on a Sunday?’ – L. Derwa

Religion, with its ideals of good human conduct and its preponderance within our societies, has gained an increased presence in changing rooms and on the pitch. On the one hand, such a development may have helped to add purity to the practice of sport, but on the other hand, it may also have created controversy, with the example of athletes wanting to wear the veil at the London 2012 Olympic Games. Or, what about Christian missionary Eric Idell’s refusal to compete in the 1924 Olympic Games, because of his race taking place on a Sunday? **M. Andre Stein**, *President and Administrator of the AISF*, also added how certain religions forbid the practice of sport during certain periods of the year. Sport is a field that welcomes all but, according to him, such limitations must not pass the entrances of stadiums and changing rooms.

Introducing a pillar of modern European society’s attitude to religion in public spaces, **M. Yves Kengen**, *director of communications at the Centre of Secular Action*, spoke of the similarity between the values of secularity and those of sport; values that reside in the experience of the submission to the law of a collective. Secularity consists of the respect of rights and duties, solidarity, fair play, and encourages respect and the discovery of the other. According to Kengen, the real heroes of sport are the volunteers, who are in charge of teaching these values to the youth in the poor urban districts. Such activity bridges communitarianism and cultivates respect between different religious communities.

‘The real heroes of sport are the volunteers, who are in charge of teaching these values to the youth’ – Y. Kengen

Mr Charles Kenfack, *Doctor of Theology, vicar, and Professor of Doctrine, History of the Church and of Greek at the Biblical Institute of Belgium, representing the Protestant and Evangelical Church*, however, argued that religion could not be left outside of the sphere of sports, but could enrich it. In his opinion, the Christian faith is all encompassing, which means that it applies to the work place, the

¹ <http://www.panathlon.be/festival/>

² <http://sportetcitoyennete.com/PDF/policy%20paper%20-%20sport%20and%20the%20migrants%20crisis.pdf>

bedroom and the sports field. In respecting the values of Christianity - such as gentleness and respect - one should not rejoice of the fall of his opponent. When one hurts an opponent without meaning to, one should apologize accordingly. In this way, religion can have a positive impact on sport.

M. Evangellos Psallas, *Secretary of the Orthodox Archduke of Belgium and part of the Oecumenical Patriarchate*, supported Kenfack's points, enunciating the Orthodox Church's rejection of sport's creation of antagonism and domination. The other must not be seen as someone who has been brought down. The aim is to measure one's strength via sharing. However, Psallas praised the sport's potential to develop human character through effort. According to the Orthodox church, the body is not a second-class element: body and soul are therefore indissociable. Man must take care of both. To privilege one at the expense of the other creates unbalances.

From such considerations then, crucial questions such as '*Should one distinguish between sport and religion?*' '*Is sport an integrative part of religion?*' and '*Is Sport an opportunity to assert one's religious beliefs, or should one remain quiet about them in this particular sphere?*' arise. Hardly any research has been conducted on such questions, and it is therefore important to create a dialogue about them.

With the aim of examining a specific parallel between religion and sport, **M. Eric De Beukelaer**, *Episcopal vicar for juridical and temporal affairs of the diocese of Liège*, sought to compare religious posture (sitting and standing at Mass) with sporting activity, whereby – in both cases - body and spirit are both in motion and in unison. In this sense, the argument '*no body, no spirit*' applies to both sport and religion. The etymology of the word 'religion,' which is '*religare*' (to bind), echoes sport's power to create bonds. The Paralympics demonstrate that in both sport and religion, even those who are handicapped can take part. **Madame Anne D'leteren**, *President of the Belgian Paralympic Committee*, and **Mme. Zehra Sayin**, *Co-CEO of the Special Olympics Belgium* invited the audience to reflect on the fact that Paralympic athletes, who share the same emotions – such as hope and disappointment - as all humans, are not so different.

'One must not abuse of one's physical strength, but stay within the boundaries of the middle way, which is rich in wisdom.' – P. Markiewicz

M. Phillippe Markiewicz, *President of the Central Israelite-Jewish Consistorie Central of Belgium*, spoke of how sport is a tool for a smooth communal life and makes the barriers of religion disappear. Jewish religious law encourages the practice of sport within the framework of wisdom, underlining that it must not lead to excess. Sport must be encouraged to become a fundamental source of sharing, of meeting, and esteem. Its force allows everyone to complete a work of beauty, from which we all benefit. **M. Denis Leblond**, *Administrator of the Buddhist Union of Belgium*, offered a perception of sport through the lens of Ancient Greece, where values were physical and less spiritual. Epic poetry did indeed relate action. Common ground can be found here between Buddhism, Aristotle's and Socrates' writings, which all promote, the 'middle way' - the *juste milieu* in French. One must not abuse of one's physical strength, but stay within the boundaries of the middle way, which is rich in wisdom.

M. Sallah Echallaoui, *President of the Executive of Muslims in Belgium*, gave the Islamic perspective on the relation between sport and religion. In Islam, sport has always occupied an important place. According to the Islamic religion, the human body is a gift from God. One must take care of it and stay in good health. Islam also holds dear core values that are similar to those of sport, as it encourages the respect of justice (via the referee in a match) and the public.

Mr Phillippe Housiaux, *President of the Panathlon Wallonie Bruxelles*, gave a closing address, in which he congratulated each speaker, and concluded that the sum of each contribution equated to the multi-layered nature of the word 'humanity.'