



## Theos – clear thinking on religion and society

Theos is a think tank working in the area of religion, politics and society. We aim to inform debate around questions of faith and secularism and the related subjects of values and identity. We were launched in November 2006, and our first report *'Doing God'; a Future for Faith in the Public Square*, written by Nick Spencer, examined the reasons why faith will play an increasingly significant role in public life.

### what Theos stands for

In our post-secular age, interest in spirituality is increasing across Western culture. We believe that it is impossible to understand the modern world without an understanding of religion. We also believe that much of the debate about the role and place of religion has been unnecessarily emotive and ill-informed. We reject the notion of any possible 'neutral' perspective on these issues.

### what Theos works on

Theos conducts research, publishes reports, and runs debates, seminars and lectures on the intersection of religion, politics and society in the contemporary world. We also provide regular comment for print and broadcast media. Recent areas of analysis include multiculturalism, Christian education, religious liberty and the future of religious representation in the House of Lords. Future areas of focus will include religion and the law, questions of values in economic policy and practice and the role of religion in international affairs.

### what Theos provides

In addition to our independently driven work, Theos provides research, analysis and advice to individuals and organisations across the private, public and not-for-profit sectors. Our unique position within the think tank sector means that we have the capacity to develop proposals that carry values – with an eye to demonstrating what really works.

### what Theos believes

Theos was launched with the support of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, but it is independent of any particular denomination. We are an ecumenical Christian organisation, committed to the belief that religion in general and Christianity in particular has much to offer for the common good of society as a whole. We are committed to the traditional creeds of the Christian faith and draw on social and political thought from a wide range of theological traditions. We also work with many non-Christian and non-religious individuals and organisations.

# Theos Friends' Programme

Theos is a religion and society think tank which seeks to inform and influence public opinion about the role of faith and belief in society.

We were launched in November 2006 with the support of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams and the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor.

## We provide

- high-quality research, reports and publications;
- an events programme;
- news, information and analysis to media companies, parliamentarians and other opinion formers.

## We can only do this with your help!

Theos Friends receive complimentary copies of all Theos publications, invitations to selected events and monthly email bulletins.

Theos Associates receive all the benefits of Friends and in addition are invited to attend an exclusive annual dinner with the Theos Director and team.

If you would like to become a Friend or an Associate, please visit [www.theosthinktank.co.uk](http://www.theosthinktank.co.uk) or detach or photocopy the form below, and send it with a cheque to Theos for the relevant amount. Thank you

Yes, I would like to help change public opinion!

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## The Sports Think Tank

Launched in 2012, the Sports Think Tank is a fully independent think tank dedicated to the advancement of the education of the public in sports policy and its incumbent benefits. We use various ways to stimulate debate and ensure accountability in sporting policy and governance including research and publications, blogging, social media, events and engaging with decision makers and governing bodies. We aim to be the driving force in sporting policy in the UK and thereby ensure that sport can benefit the wider public to the greatest possible degree.

We are committed to the following objectives:

- Pushing the boundaries of thinking in sport: Deconstructing sport to properly assess the 'case for sport' in society. Why and how should sport be so important to us? We aim to ask questions few others have asked in order to widen and deepen sport's influence for social good.
- Bridging the gap between the best academic research and policy makers: There is a growing movement of innovative academic research into sport and its influence on society. We aim to make sure this is not missed by often very busy policy makers in Whitehall and it is given the coverage it deserves in an accessible format.
- Bringing together different sectors to ensure sport's contribution to public wellbeing is as effective as possible: In particular, bringing together the commercial/business, public, non-profit and academic sectors to learn from and challenge each other with regard to their involvement in sport, which should help ensure all involved in sport can have an their say in setting the agenda.
- Understanding and providing innovative solutions to the greatest challenges facing sport: Through our engagement with policy makers and opinion formers, we aim to ensure that the various players within the sporting landscape question and challenge their role, whilst remaining central to the long term policy formulation process. We use our links to the social sciences and other disciplines to develop fresh approaches, which will move those involved in sport to consider new and innovative ways of working. Finally, we aim to utilise the expertise and knowledge of all those involved in the sports sector to assess the future of sport including technology.
- Assessing the future of sport: Utilising the expertise and knowledge of those involved in the sports sector and those outside it, we aim to explore the long term future of sport. This will involve innovations in technology and impact of these on the way we experience and engage in sport in the future.

# The Sports Think Tank – Stay in Touch

The Sports Think Tank is reliant on donations to help drive understanding and innovation in UK sporting policy. If you are interested in hearing more about us, would like to be kept up to date through our newsletter or make a donation to support our work, please contact us on [talk@sportsthinktank.com](mailto:talk@sportsthinktank.com) or fill out your details below and send to: 'The Sports Think Tank, 31-32 Bedford Street, London, WC2E 9ED'

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# **Give us our Ball Back**

## **Reclaiming Sport for the Common Good**

Paul Bickley and Sam Tomlin

Executive Summary

# executive summary

## introduction

Sport is no longer just a matter of leisure, of entertainment, of being part of something, or even of spectacular international tournaments. We have come to expect it to make us better people, to contribute to world peace, to develop our economies and to make us healthy. Sport has been reduced to being a tool rather than something with intrinsic worth.

Theos and The Sports Think Tank have worked to produce a wide ranging report which assesses the claims being made on sport's behalf. It argues that sport is constantly being set up to over-promise and under-deliver. While sport clearly does offer extrinsic benefits, these emerge from a delicate ecosystem which relies on sport being played and watched for its own sake – for its intrinsic goods and its ordinary value to people.

Turning sport into a political, economic or social tool won't work, and also takes it out of the hands of the playing and spectating public. Sport should be released from the political, economic and social demands and reclaimed for the common good.

## sport and morality

Motivated by a holistic Christian theology, men like the Reverend Charles Kingsley thought that sport could be used to train character. These views have been influential on the way the Anglo-Saxon world and (through Pierre De Coubertin) the Olympic Movement think about sport. We turn to sport as a way of shaping character or of challenging anti-social behaviour.

There is a growing body of research evidence which suggests that sport powerfully shapes behaviour – but often negatively. One study found a consistent relationship between involvement in high school sport and an increase in adult drink-driving. Another study, conducted amongst 'power sports' (boxing, weight-lifting, martial arts) participants in Bergen, Norway again detected a relationship between participation and anti-social behaviour.

The context in which a sport is conducted is highly influential. One study pointed to positive relationships between coach and player to be a significant predictor of better behaviour. The effect of playing within a 'good' team is similar to the effect that going to a 'good' school has on

educational outcomes. The moral atmosphere in which human activity is embedded may be more important than the activity in itself.

Even if players know the rules and expectations, or if administrators introduce codes of conduct, a 'game-frame' can still mean the players will behave poorly.

## sport and reconciliation

Pierre de Coubertin sought to propel sport onto the international stage as a force for peace: "The revival of the Olympic Games...in conditions suited to the needs of modern life would bring the representatives of the nations of the world face-to-face every four years, and it may be thought that their peaceful and chivalrous contests would constitute the best of Internationalisms."

This vision, after over a century of advocacy by the Olympic movement, has recently been adopted by enthusiastic politicians, and even the United Nations. The UN Office on Sport for Development and Peace was established by Kofi Annan in 2001 with a mandate to act as "the UN gateway in fostering support for sport as an efficient tool in the pursuit of humanitarian development and peace-building objectives."

Three distinct ideas underpin arguments about sport as a unifying force. First is the idea of universal 'saliency' – the metaphor of a common language. Second, there is the idea that sport provides a safe place of cultural encounter because it is a forum of channelled conflict and competition. Third, there is the idea that sport creates a 'non-political' space, where issues of contention and division are temporarily set aside.

While each claim contains an element of truth, they are also over-estimated. Sport clearly has a massive appeal that crosses cultures, but the appeal is neither universal nor in itself necessarily cohesive. The lesson of history is that the explosion of international conflict is rarely controlled by sport – more often, it is itself a fuse for conflict or even a key front in culture wars. And while the power of sport to create a non-political space can bring people together in spite of conflict, it can also offer a patina for political agendas that deserve more scrutiny (e.g., Berlin Olympics 1936) or a way for leaders to avoid just political claims (e.g., Bahrain Grand Prix 2012). Sporting idealism can create opportunities for peace – but it can also mask abuses of power.

## sport and the economy

Sport is now 'big business', meaning that the nature of the relationship between sport and money has changed dramatically within living memory. This has some tangible benefits – job creation (around 1.8% of employment in England, reportedly, is in the sport sector), higher quality and safer stadia, tax to the Exchequer, investment in the wider community or in grass

roots sport (the Premier League is investing £167.2m a year for the next three years into good causes).

Sporting 'mega-events' like the Olympics are now also expected to act as a driver for economic growth and regeneration. However, many academics argue that the economic benefits that accrue from sports mega-events are notoriously difficult to measure. The balance between public and private investment in mega-events is often misrepresented and the benefits of investment in sport infrastructure compare poorly to, for example, the benefits of reducing bottlenecks in the transport system.

No recent Olympic Games has produced proven significant economic benefits to the host city or country. Chinese commentators have described the effects of the huge investment in the Beijing Games as negligible. Eight years after the Athens 2004 Games, twenty-one of the twenty-two Olympic venues remain abandoned. The Sydney Olympics tripled its budget and the former Chief Planner for the Sydney Games has said that the host city should have focused more broadly on a legacy programme for the Olympics site and that "Sydney is now paying the price".

The World Cup in South Africa in 2010 provides another interesting case-study. As with London 2012, initial spending estimates were way off. In 2003 it was estimated that tangible costs to the South African government would be R2.3bn; this had risen to an estimated R39.3bn by 2010. A spokesperson for the South African Revenue Services stated just before the cup began "the concessions we had to give to FIFA are simply too demanding and overwhelming for us to have material monetary benefits." Overall, most mega-events are clearly 'extractive' for the host nation.

The marketisation of sport raises other issues, particularly around governance, profitability and access – the 'marks of the market' as Michael Sandel has put it. Administrators make decisions with a view to tangible revenue benefits, but underestimate the way in which this has intangible negative effects. There is also a strong argument for keeping sports such as international cricket on terrestrial television – passion is created best in the context of easy access, and since its move to pay-TV, participation rates in cricket have suffered.

## sport and the healthy society

Many studies have shown regular participation contributes to general wellbeing, leading former Chief Medical Officer Sir Liam Donaldson to state, "If a medication existed which had a similar effect [to physical activity], it would be regarded as a 'wonder drug' or 'miracle cure.'" But only seven million (or just 16.3%) adults in England are reportedly active (participating in sport three times a week for 30 minutes at moderate intensity) in 2010-11, down marginally on 2008-09 figures.



£450m has been channelled into the national governing bodies over the last four years with the aim of encouraging a million more people to be active by 2013. The return of only 109,000 new active people has been rightly described as 'poor value for money' and disappointing. Seventeen of the twenty-one governing bodies in receipt of this money saw a decrease in once-a-week participation.

The biggest factor affecting participation is general life circumstances. Sport England shows that, "Overwhelmingly, the ultimate cues for lapsing [participation rates] relate to wider macro shifts in participants' lives [e.g. 'I moved house' or 'I got married/engaged'] rather than bad experiences [in sport] per se." Mega events have no clear effect: after the Australia 2000 Games, it was reported that seven Olympic sports saw a small increase in participation while nine saw a decrease, with the pattern for non-Olympic sports broadly similar. London 2012's 'inspiration strategy' appears unlikely to have a substantial effect.

Research into sporting motivation suggests there is a difference between weak external behavioural motivations (get-fit messaging) and strong intrinsic motivation (enjoyment). Professor Mike Weed argues that, "In many cases, 'internalised' [external] motivations are wrongly thought to be intrinsic motivations." While many people play sport in order to keep fit, most will only do things they enjoy. Messaging founded on health benefits of sport for inactive people will prove difficult unless they value general health in the first place.

18% of people with a disability participated in sport once a week for 30mins in 2010-11 (up from 15% in 2005-06). However, there is work still to do. The 6% disability participation three times a week compares poorly to the 16% figure of the general population. There have been calls to ensure that the Olympic legacy promotes disability sport in schools. In education more generally a consensus needs to be reached on why young people participating is important. Do we simply want physically active young people, or young people who play sport specifically?

## conclusion and recommendations

This survey of the evidence under these four themes suggests that the more sport is asked to provide, the less it will deliver and the more frustrated we will be with it when it fails.

Johan Huizinga, claimed that, "in play we move below the level of seriousness, as the child does; but we can also move above it – in the realm of the beautiful and sacred." Play has no exterior motive, it exists simply for its own sake. In the same way, a theological understanding of sport relies on the concept of 'play'. Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner suggested that God was the "ultimate player". Creation did not need to happen, and though something meaningful was produced that pleased God (creation itself) the act of creating itself was of value.

But play has become dominated by a version of the Protestant work ethic, stripped of its religious meaning. This has resulted in a fatal shift towards over-seriousness and an emphasis on extrinsic

benefits. As historian Christopher Lasch asserts: "The degradation of sport, then, consists not in its being taken too seriously but in its subjection to some ulterior purpose, such as profit-making, patriotism, moral training, or the pursuit of health. Sport may give rise to these things in abundance, but ideally it produces them only as by-products having no essential connection with the game."

Releasing sport from the demands of public utility will allow it to occupy its rightful place in society – that of contributing to a full, happy and meaningful life. External benefits will naturally come from playing, watching and engaging in sport, but should be seen primarily as by-products of something with specific worth already. We need to be able to value sport for itself – for its intrinsic goods – namely fun or, if you prefer, wellbeing. It is by recognising this that we will reclaim sport for the common good.

**Recommendation 1 (sport and morality):** we need to be fostering a conversation on a micro (club) and a macro (sport) level about the ethical nature of competition: what would it be for teams to have a deeper appreciation of the opportunities that come with the loss of a match, to understand the history, tradition and practices of a specific sport or to accept the fallibility of a match official without questioning his or her integrity? After all, the word competition derives from the Latin *com-petere*, which literally means 'to strive or to seek with.' Even at an elite level, where the stakes of success are high, sport is a deeply cooperative activity.

**Recommendation 2 (sport and the economy):** A major part of public dissatisfaction around the sporting mega events is the way governing bodies operate a hard-headed franchise-style business model, which comes at a significant cost to host cities, yet continues to insist on the language of 'the Olympic family'. Governing bodies operate like medium-sized businesses, but with less oversight than a small NGO. Greater transparency could be achieved firstly through governing bodies adopting a code of governance similar to that expounded by the Sport and Recreation Alliance's Voluntary Code of Good Governance. If this is not effective, making governing bodies in receipt of significant public funds subject to the Freedom of Information Act would ensure this transparency and accountability.

**Recommendation 3 (sport and the economy):** Transparency in any mega-event bidding process is also imperative. The public budget for the London Olympics nearly quadrupled from the initial estimate of £2.4bn. This pattern is seen across many sport mega-events in many different countries. More scrutiny needs to be given, therefore, to the pre-bid budgets, and the financial implications clearly communicated to the wider public. In the same way Citizens UK has engaged civil society in mainstream political issues, efforts should be made to engage the public in sporting policy in easy-to-understand guides, for instance, on the cost of major sporting events.

**Recommendation 4 (sport and the healthy society):** Greater emphasis needs to be placed on a holistic sporting agenda rather than relying simply on the 'inspiration' of the Games or a desire

to get fit. The key is developing intrinsic motivation and desire to want to play based on the exhilaration, excitement and sense of challenge that comes from competition at the appropriate level. Moving beyond the 'sport for fitness' message, more research needs to be conducted into 'ordinary' barriers to participation. Forms of sport which can be played in the local community or even the home (such as those seen on recent games consoles) should be encouraged.

