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## Mixed Martial Arts As A Way To God?

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## Mixed Martial Arts As A Way To God?

### Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Jay Coakely, a prominent sport sociologist, has explored the links between religion and sport. Many avid sports fans insist that sport participation or viewing is their religion, and Coakley explores how this concept may not be far from the truth. Both have places for communal gatherings – religions have churches, temples, and mosques, sports have stadiums, ball fields, and arenas. Both have rituals before, during, and after events – religions have baptisms, opening hymns, and processions, sports have national anthems, initiations, and tailgating. The use of organizing structures, the disciplined nature of both, and the sharing of common values can be seen in sport and religion. A final area that shows this similarity between religion and sport is that —both evoke intense emotions and give meaning to people's lives|| (Coakley, 2009, p. 519). It is this final linkage that has become the foundation for a new mix of sport and religion, Christian based Mixed Martial Arts."



*Dr. Emily Dane*

## **Mixed Martial Arts As A Way To God?**

Jay Coakely, a prominent sport sociologist, has explored the links between religion and sport. Many avid sports fans insist that sport participation or viewing *is* their religion, and Coakley explores how this concept may not be far from the truth. Both have places for communal gatherings – religions have churches, temples, and mosques, sports have stadiums, ball fields, and arenas. Both have rituals before, during, and after events – religions have baptisms, opening hymns, and processions, sports have national anthems, initiations, and tailgating. The use of organizing structures, the disciplined nature of both, and the sharing of common values can be seen in sport and religion. A final area that shows this similarity between religion and sport is that “both evoke intense emotions and give meaning to people’s lives” (Coakley, 2009, p. 519). It is this final linkage that has become the foundation for a new mix of sport and religion, Christian based Mixed Martial Arts.

For many years, Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) was seen as bloodsport, was unsanctioned and illegal in many states. Arizona Senator John McCain called it “human cockfighting” (Marty, 2007). A combination of wrestling, boxing, kickboxing, and other fighting styles, MMA has now become a popular television and pay-per-view event. In 2006, the annual revenue for this sport was just over \$2.2 million dollars (Marty, 2007). As of 2010, MMA is marketed similarly to mainstream sports and is legal in 42 states. While the violence associated with the sport has not diminished, it is being increasingly seen as an acceptable form of fandom. The athletes in this sport are now emerging as public figures and are experiencing the same following, publicity, and opportunity to express personal beliefs through many media outlets. Just as we see baseball players cross themselves when approaching the plate and football players kneeling in the end zone, MMA athletes are linking their faith and strength in pursuit of excellence in their sport. From the hands raised to heaven after a win or claiming that a win “wasn’t in God’s plan for me tonight”, MMA fighters’ recognition of the importance of Christianity in their lives is becoming very common.

However, unlike many other sports, some MMA instructors are using the sport as a gateway to teach and incorporate Christianity into the *entire* life of an athlete, not just a quick recognition of Jesus in the hopes or thanks of a great performance.

Beginning small, but growing in number, several schools of mixed martial arts now combines Christian values and Biblical teachings with the training and fighting in this newly popular sport. One such organization, Xtreme Ministries near Nashville, Tennessee, preaches the motto “Where Feet, Fist and Faith Collide” (Schneiderman, 2010, para. 5). Another studio outside of Houston, Texas has named their fight team “Jesus Didn’t Tap” as a reference to Jesus not forfeiting a fight or ‘tapping out’ (Shellnutt, 2010, para. 3). The Christian Martial Arts Network currently lists almost 100 schools, studios, and organizations as part of the network of purveyors of this faith plus fighting combination (Agapy, 2008).

This link between physical activity and sport is not a new concept. In the early 1900’s the concept of Muscular Christianity drew many young men to the newly formed YMCA and the Public School Athletic League (the precursor to today’s organized school sports) (Massengale & Swanson, 1997). The idea that young men could express their masculinity through weight lifting was officially sanctioned by many Christian denominations. This idea about weight lifting being an acceptable and positive form of exercise is generally met without controversy (Massengale & Swanson, 1997). Even women today are encouraged to be physically strong and fit to help with the tasks that are expected to perform.

This expression of masculinity was not without boundaries. At the turn of the previous century in this country, collegiate football games had, on occasion, life or death outcomes. The violence on the field was so unregulated, that the injuries sustained within the game resulted in death for players. While this was not a common occurrence, it happened frequently enough to have President Roosevelt concerned enough to mandate more regulation in collegiate sport. At this same time in history, President Roosevelt deemed that good boxers would lead to good fighting soldiers, and therefore encouraged sparring as a normal part of military training. This acknowledgement about crossover effects between controlled sport training and positive behavioral outcomes is therefore not a new concept.

Why then should individuals find controversy with this new crossover between controlled sport training and competition in the form of MMA and potential positive outcomes linked to embracing Christianity?

*Isn’t there a disconnect between Jesus’ teachings and engaging in sanctioned quasi-criminal violence?*

While the popular perception of MMA has changed from a violent bloodbath to an exciting form of dramatic spectacle, not all feel that way. Many see this fighting coupled with faith as an extreme contradiction, and cry foul to the linkage. Jesus was a non-violent ‘fighter’ and MMA is clearly encouraging violence against your fellow man. Religion and specifically Christianity emphasizes personal humility, MMA is about personal achievement and conquest of another. How does a no-holds barred, combative environment endorse love, acceptance, and respect for all human beings?

The clear distinction between sacred and secular nature of the two ideals is the basis for this argument. Many Christians may agree that both Easter Sunday and Super Bowl Sunday are important in their lives, but for two very distinct reasons (Coakley, 2009). The belief that their

importance is identical, in my estimation, is inaccurate and bordering on profane. The sacred nature of religion is corrupted when the secular character of sport is seen as equal. Sport does not have divine inspiration, and to claim that it is manna from heaven distorts the miracles that Jesus performed in his lifetime. Sport has a history of discrimination against women, people of color, and homosexuals. While the Bible and some of its interpretations express these same forms of discrimination, the social acceptance of these practices is no longer as prevalent.

The social constructivist nature of sport also applies to religion in that diverse meanings emerge through social and cultural conditions under which people create and maintain them. Creation and maintenance of Biblical interpretations as well as the organization of sport have historically come from white males. As some denominations have begun to question these interpretations, so too should we question the interpretation that this link of faith and fighting is valid.

*“What led me to find Christ was that Jesus was a fighter”*

This phrase is not uncommon in many Christian MMA ministries. Research has shown that men have left the church in greater numbers than women and children, and this new link to embracing outward expressions of masculinity and dominance has been the draw to get many young men back to faith (PEW Research Center, 2010). The ‘Jesus was a fighter’ metaphor for keeping your head up and striving for personal success in life has resonated with many. In some churches, a fight night event includes the viewing of the MMA match, but also a lecture and Biblical teaching discussing how Christ fought for what he believed in.

James Dobson, the founder of a prominent evangelical group Focus on the Family, and other Christian ministers have criticized current church practices stating that they have become too feminized (Schneiderman, 2010). While the Bible does teach kindness and compassion, some ministers feel that this has come at the expense of strength and responsibility, which begin with the man as the head of the household (Schneidreman, 2010). In Dobson’s view by using this sport, which in its essence stresses discipline, control, and physical dominance, many young men are able to become ‘proper men’ and the uncontested leaders of their families. These ministries do not condone any sort of domestic physical abuse or aggressive control of the family, but attempt to reestablish the male as the unquestioned head of the household. Dobson stated in a February 2010 article “We’ve raised a generation of little boys” and, in his estimation, this is not consistent with messages in the Bible.

Many ministries struggle with making the Bible meaningful in today’s society. Jesus doesn’t explicitly address how to deal with kids addicted to video games, with parents addicted to work, and many of society’s current problems. How then can we apply the Bible’s teachings and messages to our Y2K environment? Advocates of these Christian based MMA academies state that the physical training can be the hook to keep people coming around. That once they are in the door, and have bought into the system, fighters *want* to study the Bible. They want to learn more about Jesus and how they can bring his awesome attributes into their own lives. Through these meaningful discussions, people can bring faith back into their lives. Without this link to MMA, many feel that these individuals would be lost to faith forever.

Aside from my immediate dislike of Dobson's statement that the church has become too feminized, I have to wonder about the mentality of using a violent hook to explore a non-violent teaching. Isn't that like a bait and switch? Wasn't one of the Ten Commandments about bearing false witness?

Don't get me wrong, I think that religion is one way (and a great way) to enrich your life. In whatever form you seek to learn and practice, I feel there is value in the commandments and some of the overarching messages present in the Bible. So finding new ways to introduce religion to those who have not found it will often lead to positive life changes for that individual. However, I become concerned with this link when it seems to be reversing years of progressive equal rights initiatives. It seems as only the most conservative of religious groups have embraced this linkage of MMA to religion, and I am uncomfortable with many of their limited ways of thinking on the world. To couple this limited way of thinking with an encouragement of disciplined violence (when the situation warrants), makes me concerned about how far some individuals will go. We have thousands of years of history which provides us examples of 'justified violence' in the name of religious teachings and motives. What then is to stop the man from asserting his position as the 'unquestioned head of household' with a little domestic violence? If Jesus was a fighter, and the Bible says men should be in control of the family, what then is the problem?

Some may think that I'm paranoid or falling victim to my own extreme thinking. I do understand that watching violence does not automatically lead to committing violence. I also understand that that carryover effects (violence, aggression, etc.) from sport to regular life are not a guarantee to all participants. However, by providing this religious justification for dominance against others, seems to be a slippery slope. It is when the sporting organization, rather than an individual by choice, chooses to sell disciplined violence as an acceptable segue into religion, that I become uneasy. This sweat and Holy Oil should not mix.

For further information visit:

<http://www.anointedfighter.com/>

<http://www.gladiatorssofchrist.com/>

[http://www.spiritfilledsoldiersmma.com/Home\\_Page.php](http://www.spiritfilledsoldiersmma.com/Home_Page.php)

<http://www.christianmartialarts.agapy.com/home.php>

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Below the bridge  
(Photo by Melissa Jadlos)