

# NTR

## SIGNS OF THE TIMES

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### Not Just a Game

Sport, as part of the daily living of billions of people, belongs to a complex network of recreation, economics, politics, and identity construction as well as popular expression. The tendencies in theological and ministerial circles are to mine sporting events for religious significance or to view particular sports as metaphors for matters theological. The actions of fans have led scholars to contemplate that perhaps in some cases certain sports function as religions and that high profile events like the National Football League's (NFL) annual Super Bowl, or FIFA's soccer World Cup are expressions of public ritual in civic religions. However critical attention to sport through intentionally religious lenses tends to avoid the more complex relationships of our beloved pastimes with their legacies of colonization and racism or their entanglements in such realities as migration and globalization.

#### **The Complicated Case of Baseball/Beisbol**

In his response to the 2010 death of baseball's controversial New York Yankees'

owner George Steinbrenner, former mayor of New York City, Ed Koch, reminisced about the impact of the 1978 Yankee World Series win on a city enduring trying times. Then Mayor Koch had the championship trophy placed in the rotunda of City Hall: "I knew, as the Romans knew, that the people require circuses and theatrics" (Dwyer). Koch's indirect reference to Juvenal's "panem et circenses" (literally, bread and circuses) is a reminder of the role sports play in imperial machinations. The organization of games for political benefit is not new and its efficacy as public space to control imperial subjects and send messages to one's friends and enemies can be found from the Romans to the Aztecs and beyond.

At the same time, those same games have been and continue to be used as acts of resistance or even subversion by spectators, fans and even athletes. Consider for example the words of Winston Llenas, a Dominican ballplayer who is now president of the team las Aguilas Cibaenas. A self-described "subversive" he recalls the mixed role of beisbol as a political tool and as a means of resistance during the dictatorship of the

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Dominican Republic's Rafael Trujillo Molina (1930–61).

The ballparks were the lungs that allowed us to breathe freely, if only for a few hours. . . . They say here *'Al pueblo hay que darle pan y circo.'* To the people you must give bread and circus. Baseball has been the (*expletive deleted*) circus! Trujillo used baseball to buy peace. When we were playing, it deflected attention away from politics. But for me, rooting against *Escogido* [a team closely connected to members of Trujillo's family, Trujillo himself was not a baseball *fanatico*] was the closest you could get to rooting against Trujillo (Ruck,109).

This use of beisbol in defiance is also evident today in the words of Cuban exile Ramón Batista, who aided the defection of pitcher Orlando "El Duque" Hernández. Describing an incentive for his role in aiding Hernández, Batista admits, "This is one way to hurt Castro without killing anybody. . . . It was one way to put this (*expletive deleted*) in his place without being in Cuba. Because I know that Castro loves his players like they were his babies" (Fainaru and Sanchez, 82).

The Cuban affinity for the game intersected with the turn of the 20th century imperial aspirations of the United States. In what may appear a contradiction, the sport of one colonizer (USA) becomes the instrument of resistance to the presence of the former colonizer—Spain (González Echevarría). The relationship between baseball and the colonizing moves of the United States dates to the late 19th century. This neocolonial aspect of baseball is best reflected in the attitude of A.G. Spalding, who took a touring team across the globe in 1888–89. Spalding boasts, "Base Ball has 'followed the flag' . . . to Alaska . . . to the

Hawaiian Islands . . . to the Philippines, to Porto Rico and to Cuba, and wherever a ship floating the Stars and Stripes finds anchorage today, somewhere on a nearby shore the American National Game is in progress" (14). The spread of the sport throughout Latin America, for example, is often connected to U.S. influence via military presence or commerce, though defeating U.S. teams was a particular source of subaltern pride and a manifestation of resistance (González Echevarría, Ruck, Jamail). Contrary to pundits who insist on describing the Latino presence as the "new face of baseball," beisbol developed across Latin America producing amateur and professional leagues and countless ballplayers that have played on teams in various leagues throughout the American hemisphere since the 1870's. It is also worth noting that U.S. athletes from the Major, Minor and Negro leagues played and/or continue to play together and earn paychecks on teams from Venezuela to Cuba, from Mexico to the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico.

### Baseball and Im/migration

Today, ball players born outside of the 50 U.S. states constitute almost 28 percent of MLB rosters and almost 50 percent of the minor leagues. Latinos, USA or Puerto Rican born, and those from Latin America, together make up approximately 27 percent of MLB. However, the specter of neocolonialism lingers as baseball's current employment practices and economic policies beg questions of social justice. Arturo Marcano Guevara and David Fidler write, "[w]hile the Latin presence on major league teams in North America may reflect a 'Golden Age' for Latin baseball players, the approach of major league teams to Latin talent in the Dominican Republic and Venezuela represents a 'Golden Arches' approach to Latin children and young men: the mass consumption of cheap commodities" (21).

This matter of corporate responsibility arose to the forefront at the 2010 All Star game with the impending prospect of Arizona Senate Bill 1070. The MLB Players Association (MLBPA) expressed its opposition to the bill in a statement that recognized the impact such legislation would have not only on players (internationals on legitimate work visas, residents, immigrants and U.S. citizens), but on their families as well. Arizona is also home to major and minor league teams, Spring Training's Cactus League not to mention countless fans—residents and tourists—that would face potential discrimination in light of this legislation targeting alternately documented immigrants. Baseball commissioner Bud Selig remained silent on the matter during the “circus” of the 2010 All Star game however its media feeding frenzy did elicit some responses primarily from Latino players. While some expressed intentions to boycott the 2011 All Star game if it remained in Phoenix, Ariz., others quickly modified their statements, while still others refused to comment.

Most notable among the silent was the Yankees' Alex Rodríguez. In 2004 Rodríguez, the New York-born son of Dominican immigrants, who had been raised in both countries, was under attack for denying his heritage. He tried to explain that he understood the question to be one of where he was born, not how he felt or what he called himself. In an effort to set the record straight, A-Rod proclaimed in an interview, “Soy más dominicano que el plátano. Así es como me siento” (Rojas). Approached for comment on the eve of the 2010 All Star game Rodríguez distanced himself once again with his response, “Wrong guy,” as he pointed the

reporters in the direction of other ball players (“AZ Immigration Law”).

One is left to wonder whether it was the will of owners that squelched outspokenness or if the realization of potential personal dollars lost in lucrative endorsements brought external or self-censorship. The sad reality is that for some, the financial loss is too high a price to pay when baseball remains the ticket out of poverty for entire families and communities throughout Latin America. How does MLB understand its ethical responsibility to its employees and fans in addressing this matter since currently the sport is significantly dependent on a migrant labor force?

### **Beyond Baseball**

The 2010 FIFA World Cup is another example of fertile ground for exploration. Consider the irony of first Ghana and then later the former colonizer the Netherlands being cheered on as the “home team favorite” in South Africa with its not too distant apartheid past? Consider the streets of Barcelona. On the Saturday before the soccer cup final, the streets filled with protesters calling for the autonomy of Cataluña, on Sunday after the final, they were filled with revelers waving Spanish flags.

Sport is intricately intertwined in the fabric of our daily living and its complexities are worthy of our theological attention, not simply as metaphors or even handy preaching tropes. In theological studies, the story of sport and its colonial baggage remains an often neglected part of our scholarly reflections despite a growing body of literature in other disciplines. There is much to learn and ponder by reading critically the texts and contexts of our games.

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