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Emotional Experiences in the Context of Religion and Sport

Keywords: religion, sport, emotions, experience, modernity

Słowa kluczowe: religia, sport, emocje, doświadczenie, nowoczesność

Abstract

The subject of this paper is the relationship between religion and sport. The aim of my considerations is to criticize the position presented by the American philosopher Eric Bain-Selbo, according to which sporting experiences may quite rightly be described as religious experiences. In the first part of the article, I reconstruct Wayne Proudfoot's concept of religious experience that underlies Bain-Selbo's analysis. I then discuss the research conducted by Bain-Selbo and the conclusions he draws from it. In the next part of the article, referring to Charles Taylor's hermeneutical approach, I show that Proudfoot's and Bain-Selbo's methodology leads to a theoretically unjustified reductionism. I argue that an in-depth articulation of individual self-interpretation allows for an insight into the dynamics of sporting and religious experiences, and thus to see the differences that separate them. In the last part of the article, I invoke the considerations of William James, John Hick and Robert Roberts and try to show that, given the moral consequences of our experiences and their phenomenological description (intentionality), the experiences evoked by sport and religion can by no means be identified with each other.

Introduction

The subject matter of this article concerns the relationship between sport and religion. In particular, I focus on the subjective dimension of these phenomena, i.e., on religious experiences and on the experiences of participants in sporting events. The issues concerning similarities and differences between sport and religion are the focus of interdisciplinary research. This is dealt with by both theoreticians of sport and physical culture and researchers into the condition of religion in modern society (Bromberger, 1995; Davie, 1993; Edwards, 1973; Hervieu-Léger, 2000; Jirásek, 2015; Kosiewicz, 2000; Machoń, 2021; Novak, 1994; Parry, 2007; Pasek, 2012; Prebish, 1984; Twietmeyer, 2015; Zowisło, 2001; 2020). The functional approach to religion, present in Émile Durkheim's (1995) deliberations, is a very important point of reference in this context. Pointing to the communal dimension of sport, some claim that it has a quasi-religious character (Edwards, 1973). Others, however, go a step further and put forward the thesis of the identity of sport and religion (Prebish, 1984). Some also see sport as an example of a "civic religion" (see Kossakowski, 2017). There are also approaches that reject the religious view of sport while stressing its spiritual nature (Jirásek, 2015; Novak, 1994; Parry, 2007, Zowisło, 2001).

The proponents of the functional analysis focus mainly on the external, institutional-ritual aspect of sport and religion which, in their view, makes the subjective dimension related to these phenomena secondary or neglected. In this light, an examination of the similarities and differences between religious and sporting *experiences* seems particularly relevant. The question can then be asked whether the emotions and experiences generated by sport (euphoria, awe, wonder) do not unequivocally prove their religious character? Does religious language, which is often used to describe the specificity of sports experiences, not lead us to the same conclusion? This article attempts to answer these questions.

The American philosopher Eric Bain-Selbo (2008, 2019) observes that religion and sport are multifaceted and intrinsically complex cultural phenomena. In his view, in the case of sport, as in the case of religion, one may speak of "myths and legends, heroes and saints, rituals and sacrifice, sacred sites and community" (2008, p. 1). Thus, sport, like religion, is characterized by doctrinal, institutional-organizational, ritual-symbolic

and existential dimensions. It is this last element concerning our experiences that is the focus of Bain-Selbo's research. The aim of his considerations is therefore to examine the relationship between the experiences of religious adherents and the experiences of participants in sporting events.

Bain-Selbo's analyses include a theoretical and an empirical component. The first is the concept of religious experience proposed by a representative of the pragmatist current in the philosophy of religion, Wayne Proudfoot (1985). As for the second element, this is the research that Bain-Selbo conducted among Southern college football fans. On the basis of it, Bain-Selbo concludes that sporting experiences can quite legitimately be regarded as religious experiences. In his view, what is decisive here is the language we use to describe the emotions that arise in connection with these experiences. Thus, if we can describe two seemingly different phenomena in the same way, it means that they are similar or even identical to each other. As he writes, "I will defend the claim that there are good reasons to believe that the experience of the Southern college football fan is similar to many experiences that people generally would describe as religious" (2008, p. 1).

Wayne Proudfoot's Conception of Religious Experience

I will begin by discussing the theoretical background to Bain-Selbo's considerations, Wayne Proudfoot's theory of religious experience. Proudfoot formulated his concept in a 1985 book entitled *Religious Experience*. Stephen Bush (2012, p. 101) notes that this work significantly influenced the debate between perennialists and constructivists, tipping the scales in favor of the latter. Perennialists argue that religious experience, especially mystical, relates to supernatural reality and as such cannot be reduced to cultural and social conditions. In this view, religious experience is *sui generis*, i.e., it forms a special class which—compared to other types of experience—is characterized by its own specificity. On the other hand, proponents of constructivism deny the transcultural character of religious experience and claim that its content is entirely derivative from the contingent factors that condition it (pp. 101–102).

The starting point of Proudfoot's analysis is the "emotional turn" in the consideration of religion, initiated by Friedrich Schleiermacher

and continued by such thinkers as William James, Rudolph Otto, Joachim Wach, and Mircea Eliade. This turn, especially in Schleiermacher's and Otto's approach, consisted in identifying the essence of religious experience with inner mental states, i.e., emotions, feelings, or intuitions, which, in contrast to the sphere of language and thought, are immediate and non-representational (Proudfoot, 1985, pp. 22, 37, 40–41, 76–79). In Proudfoot's view, there is no such thing as a specifically religious emotion or feeling that is immediate and marks the essence of religious experience. Rejecting perennialism, Proudfoot believes that all experience, including religious experience, is necessarily conceptual and therefore culturally mediated (pp. 67, 71–72, 100). It is the concepts and beliefs we draw from cultural resources that form the entire content of religious experience.

One of the pillars of the constructivism adopted by Proudfoot is the “two-factor theory of emotion” proposed by the American psychologist Stanley Schachter. In their article *Cognitive, Social, and Physiological Determinants of Emotional State*, Schachter and Jerome Singer (1962) described the results of a famous experiment which, in the authors' view, confirm the validity of the two-factor theory of emotions. According to this conception, our emotions are the result of the interaction between two constitutive elements: first, the “physiological state of arousal” and second, the “cognitive label” we assign to these states (p. 380). Schachter and Singer argue that arousal states (e.g., an accelerated heartbeat) are emotionally neutral. This means that these states only account for the strength or intensity of the emotion but do not determine what emotion we are experiencing at any given moment. The type of emotion we experience is determined by cognitive factors. The main conclusion of the research conducted by Schachter and Singer is that people who are in a state of sudden unexplained arousal will try to make sense of this state using the cognitive factors available to them. This means that, depending on the context, the same state of physiological arousal can be interpreted as anger, sadness, joy, or rage (pp. 381–382).

Citing Schachter's conception, Proudfoot (1985, p. 100) argued that there are no inherent characteristics of emotions that determine their nature. Consequently, there are also no specifically religious emotions that define the essence of religious experience. It is the conceptual framework that we impose on a shapeless set of physiological sensations that determines that we label certain emotions and experiences as religious. Everything is a matter of interpretation by the experiencing subject. Religious experience

is therefore mainly characterized not by emotions, but by concepts and beliefs that the subject draws from the situational context. In this account, the belief that I have a religious experience is derived from other beliefs, such as my belief that engaging in religious practices can lead to an encounter with a supernatural entity. As Proudfoot (1985) noted, “a person identifies an experience as religious when [they come] to believe that the best explanation of what has happened to [them] is a religious one” (p. 101).

Invoking Charles Peirce, Proudfoot argued that all knowledge is inferential. This led him to reject introspection as the privileged method that gives insight into our inner states (pp. 66–67, 89). According to Proudfoot, there is no essential difference between self-consciousness, or first-person knowledge, and third-person knowledge. This is because the process of recognizing one’s own emotional states is the same as attributing emotions to other people and involves inference, underlying our behavior and the circumstances in which we find ourselves. The experiencing subject is therefore not the “final authority” on the states they experience. It is the external observer who is often in a more privileged position to ascertain the nature of our experience (p. 107).

In this connection, Proudfoot made an important distinction between “descriptive reduction” and “explanatory reduction” (pp. 170–172). The first type of reduction consists in omitting, in the identification of a given experience, the language in which the individual defines it. According to Proudfoot, such a procedure is unacceptable. If we want to analyze certain experiences of an individual, we cannot abstract from the language in which they are expressed. The second kind of reduction is that in formulating explanatory sentences we abstract from the sentences that form the *explanandum*. Moreover, the *explanans* need not be accepted by the subject whose experiences are the object of study. In Proudfoot’s view, explanatory reduction is perfectly acceptable and constitutes a normal research procedure.

Eric Bain-Selbo’s Thesis of Sports Experiences as Religious Experiences

I now turn to a discussion of Bain-Selbo’s (2008; 2019) findings and the conclusions he draws from them regarding religious experiences and sporting experiences. The empirical basis for Bain-Selbo’s inquiry is a survey

he conducted of Southern college football fans. Respondents were asked to provide words that they felt adequately described the experience of attending a sporting event. Bain-Selbo divided the responses obtained into two groups. The first group consisted of “potential religious descriptors,” i.e., words that, depending on the specific religion, may have religious connotations. Terms such as “fun,” “great,” “entertaining,” “utter chaos,” and “better than sex” appear here. The second group consisted of “religious descriptors,” words that we often use to describe experiences related to the personal and institutional dimensions of religion. These include terms such as “fellowship,” “community,” “tradition,” “awe-inspiring,” “passion,” “intensity,” and even “ineffability,” a word that often appears in the context of mystical experiences (Bain-Selbo, 2008, pp. 1–2). As for the percentage spread of responses, as Bain-Selbo notes, “More than half of the respondents used at least one religious or possibly religious descriptor to explain the game day experience”(p. 2).

On the basis of his results, Bain-Selbo notes that sporting experiences trigger positive and intense emotions that allow us to transcend everyday routines, have a sense of participating in something important, and be part of a meaningful whole. Consequently, he argues that the emotions that accompany sports fans on game day are similar or the same as what we usually refer to as “religious emotions” (p. 3).

The question, then, is how does Bain-Selbo ultimately interpret the results of his research? Do the answers of the interviewees unambiguously indicate the religious character of sports experiences? This might seem to be his standpoint. However, his reflections led him to a startling conclusion. As Bain-Selbo (2008) writes:

My point is not that the survey data *proves* that Southern college football fans have religious experiences. My point also is not that they describe the experience as religious (they frequently do not) and thus it is religious. My point is that the survey data and the way they describe the experience are such that *one might assume* [emphasis—D. B.] that they are having religious experiences as a consequence of their participation in Southern college football rituals. (p. 4)

So although the respondents do not explicitly describe their experiences as religious (they only use religious descriptors), we can, as Bain-Selbo argues, assume that their experiences of participating in sporting events do indeed

merit the term religious experiences. Thus, they are not merely quasi-religious experiences but authentic religious experiences.

On what grounds does Bain-Selbo arrive at this conclusion? At the core of his reasoning is Proudfoot's idea that, as I have already written, the key factor determining the nature of experience is the interpretation offered by the subject. According to Proudfoot's model of emotion, the same state of physiological arousal can be interpreted differently depending on the context and the concepts we usually associate with it. Bain-Selbo (2019) notes that an obstacle to treating sporting experiences as religious is the perennialistic vision of religious experience functioning on a popular level, which assumes that the sphere of the sacred is separate from the sphere of the profane (p. 11). Thus, if we were to convince participants in sporting events of the validity of the constructivist concept and of the fact that there are in fact no specifically religious emotions, they would describe their experiences as religious, and this would make them *de facto* religious experiences. As Bain-Selbo (2008) writes:

In the case of experiences surrounding the participation (either as an athlete or spectator) in sporting events, it very well could be the case that the participants have similar physiological and psychological experiences as religious practitioners have—but the former are not having “religious” experiences because they simply do not label them that way as do the latter. If, for example, the participants in the sporting event had a different understanding of what religion is or what a religious experience is, perhaps they more likely would use the term “religious” to describe their experiences and, thus, those experiences legitimately could be considered religious. (pp. 7–8)

Bain-Selbo's reasoning can be presented as follows: 1. There are no specifically religious emotions; 2. Sports experiences and religious experiences evoke the same emotions; 3. Religious experience is determined by the interpretation made by the experiencing subject; 4. If sports participants had the correct (Proudfoot's proposed) conception of religious experience, they would refer to sports experiences as religious experiences; 5. There are good reasons to conclude that sporting experiences constitute religious experiences. Before pointing out the shortcomings of Bain-Selbo's reasoning, I will address a critique of Proudfoot's conception.

Critique of Proudfoot's Conception

Although the results of Schachter and Singer's experiment are highly questionable, as William Barnard (1992) notes, Proudfoot presents them as if they were a matter of fundamental acceptance within the psychological community (p. 234). This is all the more surprising given that in 1985, at the time of the publication of Proudfoot's book, there was already a substantial literature questioning both the two-factor theory of emotion itself and the results of the experiment that was to confirm it.

In a 1981 article, John Cotton reviews the critical literature on Schachter's concept. According to Cotton, "While Schachter's theory has sparked enormous interest and research, it has often been controversial, and many have questioned the empirical evidence upon which it stands" (p. 366). One of the main objections to Schachter relates to his thesis of the completely emotionally undetermined nature of bodily arousal. As Cotton (1981, p. 366) notes, other researchers take the position that physiological changes not only determine the intensity of emotions, but are also partly responsible for their quality.¹

According to Bush (2011), Proudfoot, relying on Schachter's conception, fails to recognize the importance of non-conceptual causal factors in determining the nature of experience (p. 112). Proudfoot, like Schachter, refers to examples where the nature of physiological arousal is sufficiently general to allow for relatively different interpretations. Bush gives examples of situations in which it is the physiological factors induced for instance by the effects of various substances that are the main determinant of the emotions experienced (pp.112–113). Accordingly, as Bush (2011) writes, "the causal processes themselves are indispensable (...) to the determination of the nature of the experience (...) If this is so, then beliefs and concepts do not play as much of a role in determining the nature of experiences as Proudfoot indicates" (p.114).

The presence of non-discursive elements in religious experience can be read as an argument that weakens the validity of constructivism. After all,

¹ Cotton mentions here such researchers as Magda Arnold, Carroll Izard, Robert Plutchik, and Silvan Tomkins.

it cannot be excluded *a priori* that it is the nonconceptual elements of religious experience that constitute the loci of the transcultural.

Empirical and conceptual objections to the two-factor theory of emotion call into question many of the theses propounded by Proudfoot. If emotion and experience cannot be reduced solely to the conceptual, then Proudfoot's position that they are devoid of intrinsic qualities that give them identity seems highly questionable. I am inclined to the position that the subjective side of emotions, connected with the feeling experienced by the subject, plays an important role in the process of their recognition. One cannot therefore, as Proudfoot does, discredit introspection and privilege the external observer in the process of attributing emotions. For the first-person perspective gives us insight into that information which is not intrinsically directly given to the observer. And although the external observer can often help us to recognize our emotions, this is possible on the assumption that he or she has been initiated into the world of our inner experiences.

With regard to religious experience, it should be noted that in many spiritual traditions, a careful examination of one's inner self, a skillful recognition of one's own experiences, is not only a necessary element of spiritual development, but is also an important ability which makes it possible to distinguish between what is genuinely religious and what is illusory. This is one of the purposes of meditation practices. It is precisely the capacity for introspection, acquired through long and arduous exercises, which lies at the basis of mystical experiences (Barnard, 1992, p. 245).

One cannot therefore agree with Proudfoot that every religious experience is an arbitrary imposition of the external, of concepts and beliefs drawn from cultural resources on amorphous mental states. If we were to equate the content of every religious experience with what is given through cultural resources, it would be difficult to explain those experiences that become the basis for reformist actions that radically challenge a given tradition (pp. 243–244; King, 1988, p. 267). Of course it is true that every experience is conditioned by its socio-cultural context. However, we make a mistake when we claim on this basis that no experience can transcend the matrices that condition it.

Importance of the Self-Interpretation in the Study of Religious and Sports Experiences

Proudfoot's conception favors the third-person perspective of the analyst over the first-person perspective. This kind of privileging is also evident in Bain-Selbo's reflections, for the validity of his thesis on the religious nature of sports experiences requires that the individual ignores their own language of self-interpretation in favor of the language used by the researcher. As I have already written, according to Bain-Selbo, what prevents participants in sporting events from describing their experiences as religious is their beliefs about religion. If they had the concept of religious experience propounded by Proudfoot, they would recognize the religious nature of sporting experiences.

Such a position raises a number of doubts and is open to the charge of illegitimate reductionism. I shall address this issue critically, referring to the views of the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor. He famously claimed that humans are "self-interpreting animal[s]" (Taylor, 1985, pp. 45–76). This means that the concepts in which we conceive our lives constitute our experience. Thus, if we want to explain subjective reality, we cannot overlook the concepts that individuals use to characterize their life practices.

Taylor's hermeneutics of the subject is based on the distinction proposed by Clifford Geertz (1983) between "experience-near concepts" and "experience-distant concepts" (p. 57). According to Taylor, an understanding of a subject requires a prior identification of its relevant experience-near concepts. This does not mean, however, that we should stop at these concepts. For Taylor's method contains a critical element and strives for an in-depth analysis of the language of self-interpretation of the individual. This means that Taylor allows for the use of experience-distant concepts, provided that continuity is maintained between the self-interpretation of the individual and its critical apprehension. In his view, only in this way can we understand the essence of the individual's experience and avoid reductionism.

The procedure of explanatory reduction applied by Proudfoot (1985) and Bain-Selbo (2008, 2019) is completely different. This method not only allows, but even recommends, a break in continuity between the language of individual self-interpretation and the language used by the analyst. This means that in explaining the subject's experience, we ignore

the language of his self-interpretation. According to Proudfoot and Bain-Selbo, limiting oneself to the language of subject's self-interpretation leaves no room for further analysis. This positioning, however, is wrong and is based on a false alternative, i.e., either we include the language of the individual and our analysis suffers, or we ignore this language in favor of analysis. This overlooks the third possibility that Taylor presented.

The use of explanatory reduction seems particularly illegitimate in the case of religious experience. Consider an example. If John claims to have experienced an action of sanctifying grace, then, according to Proudfoot, this event has an entirely naturalistic basis and can be explained by a two-factor theory of emotion. As Bush (2011) writes, "In Proudfoot's view, the heightened state is in actuality produced through thoroughly naturalistic means by the emotional and physiological stimulation that results from engaging in spiritual practices" (p. 112). There is here a radical and, I think, unwarranted break between the language of John's self-interpretation, which contains religious concepts, and the language of the researcher, which is based on naturalistic concepts. However, if we consider that questions of religious faith remain epistemologically undefined (there are no conclusive arguments for either theism or atheism), this procedure is theoretically unjustified. This is because it excludes *a priori* the adequacy of John's interpretation.

Let us now return to Bain-Selbo. In the course of his survey, he explained his thesis on the religious nature of sporting experiences to the participants. He noted that they "expressed their agreement with the hypothesis 'in theory,' but refused to really embrace it. They seemed to understand the argument, but psychologically could not assent to it" (Bain-Selbo, 2008, p. 2). Thus, we can see that the validity of Bain-Selbo's theory requires the individual to abandon their language of self-interpretation and suppress their intuitions. Then, when attending sporting events, they will be able to describe their experiences as religious. The problem, however, is that it is the self-interpretations and intuitions of the individual that are relevant here and that cannot be ignored in formulating theoretical conclusions about their experiences.

Taylor's hermeneutics sheds a completely different light on this issue. Adopting its assumptions, the primary focus should be on articulating the reasons why Bain-Selbo's interviewed individuals feel reluctant to label sporting experiences as religious. It seems very likely that, as believers, they associate religious experience with concepts of a religious nature,

referring to the supernatural. Then, with a more in-depth articulation, it is necessary to point to the intentionality of religious experiences, which consists in the fact that these experiences have as their correlate what religious persons consider to be the object of their faith. If so, then we may venture the thesis that the source of religious people's reluctance to equate religious experiences with sporting experiences is that the latter are directed towards a sporting spectacle, i.e., an intrinsically secular object. In this approach, we go beyond the practical articulations of the subjects (feelings of reluctance) and give them a more concrete theoretical sense by pointing to an essential feature of our experiences, namely their intentionality. However, unlike the Bain-Selbo approach, we do not lose sight of individual self-interpretation and do not fall into reductionism.

Both Proudfoot and Bain-Selbo, in applying the method of "explanatory reduction," attempt to replace the concepts used by the individual to explain the way they leads their life with concepts external and revisionary to the language of their self-interpretation. In this way, Proudfoot and Bain-Selbo place themselves in the morally dubious role of an expert in relation to the individual, who knows better what the content of their experiences really is.

Bain-Selbo's perspective as a disengaged observer makes him focus only on the external similarities between sporting and religious experiences. Consequently, he claims—as I have already written—that in both cases we are dealing with the same experiences, e.g., euphoria or "flow." The problem is that underneath the layer of similarities there are significant differences. In order to grasp these differences, it is necessary to go deeper into the nature and dynamics of the experiences discussed here.

In the study of religion, it has been common to distinguish between two main approaches to the definition of religion.² On the one hand, we have advocates of the functional approach and, on the other, proponents of the substantial approach to religion (Davie, 2007). The functional approach, represented by Émile Durkheim among others, focuses on what functions religion performs. In this view, it is not the object of our beliefs that is important, but the degree of commitment they engender in us (Twietmeyer, 2015). By treating certain areas of life and activities as the most important

² I refer here to my article on the critique of functional analyses of sport and religion (Barnat, 2019a).

we thereby attribute to them, as functionalists claim, a religious or sacred character. It is the functionalist view of the phenomena under analysis that underpins Bain-Selbo's position. He writes that sport "functions religiously to the extent that it provides opportunities for fans to have religious experiences" (Bain-Selbo, 2008, p. 1).

The disadvantage of functional definitions of religion is their over-inclusiveness. From the point of view of a functional understanding of religion, in addition to sport, the following can also be considered as religion: nationalism, humanism, capitalism, scientism, etc. Thus, if what we expect from definitions is that they demarcate certain spheres of reality or explain the conventional understanding of certain phenomena, then the functional account of religion turns out to be too broad.

In this aspect, substantial definitions of religion are much better. According to this approach, represented among others by Max Weber, understanding religion requires an answer to the question of what religion is. In other words, the object of belief is taken as decisive in defining religion here. What marks the identity of religion and at the same time distinguishes it from other spheres of culture is the belief in the existence of supernatural entities. Compared to the functional view of religion, the substantial approach is more exclusive, as it limits the field of analysis to those belief systems that have a concept of the supernatural realm. The price for the exclusive nature of these definitions is the threat of ethnocentrism (Davie, 2007). However, bearing in mind the scope of my considerations, i.e., the culture of the Western world, where the dominant forms of religion refer to the supernatural realm, this definition fulfils its purpose.

In my reflections, I take a substantial-functional approach to religion. I agree that a constitutive feature of religion is belief in a supernatural reality. From this belief, however, there follow important socio-cultural consequences that translate into how religion functions. The personal dimension of religion, based on experience, is tightly linked to its doctrinal, organizational-institutional, and symbolic-practical dimensions.

For my considerations on sport, I draw on the view of it proposed by Jay Coakley (2003). On the one hand, he takes into account the cultural and social meanings associated with sport and its functional aspect. On the other, he attempts to articulate the constitutive elements of sport. In this regard, Coakley offers the following definition: "Sports are institutionalized competitive

activities that involve (...) the use of relatively complex physical skills by participants motivated by internal and external rewards” (2003, p. 21). From the point of view of my analysis, it is important that this definition emphasizes the competitive dimension of sport and captures the phenomenon of sport from the organizational side. Indeed, these two elements are at the heart of the sporting experience of both athletes and spectators. It is true that sport, like religion, enables a certain kind of extraordinary, unique experience of an emotional nature. However, these general similarities cannot obscure from us the important differences that occur between religion and sport.

Moral Consequences of Religious Experience and Its Intentionality

The contemporary “multicomponent conception of emotions” emphasizes the irreducible complexity of our experiences. In this view, as Andrzej Dąbrowski (2014) writes, emotions constitute “multicomponent intentional states: (1) cognitive-evaluative; (2) correlated with physiological and bodily changes; (3) closely related to neurological events; (4) with an emotional tinge (subjective feeling); (5) with a tendency to action and/or (6) expression” (p. 130). I would now like to draw attention to the fifth element of the definition of emotional states cited here. The motivational dimension of our experiences is an integral part of religious experience and, I believe, also accounts for an important difference between religion and sport.

Theorists of religious experience often draw attention to its practical consequences, in that it leads the individual to a profound moral and spiritual transformation, involving the whole of their subjective powers. This issue was an important aspect of the classical analyses of William James (1978). Nowadays it appears in the reflections of, among others, John Hick (2006) or, the previously mentioned Charles Taylor (2007).³ As Hick (2007) writes, “the universal criterion of the authenticity of religious experience consists in its moral and spiritual fruits in human life” (p. 51). Religious experience is thus supposed to release motivation for universal love, solidarity,

³ For a detailed analysis of the concept of spiritual transformation in the secular culture of the Western world, see my book on Charles Taylor (Barnat, 2019b).

compassion, to cause a shift from one's own self to an attitude of selflessness and sensitivity to the needs of other beings.

In Bain-Selbo's approach, the issue of moral conversion is absent. It seems, however, that if we want to compare sports experiences and religious experiences or to equate them, this issue becomes particularly important and cannot be ignored. A proponent of equating religious and sporting experiences would therefore have to show either that the thesis of the transformative character of religion is false or that sporting experiences are also characterized by this feature. Of course, it must be kept in mind that sporting experiences can have positive moral consequences: the ability to accept defeat, respect for rivals, self-discipline, self-sacrifice (Machoń, 2021, p. 203). While these are important, and by no means to be disparaged, they cannot be equated with the consequences of a genuinely religious overall transformation of the individual, involving a new way of seeing reality and releasing the motivation for selfless universal love. Here I agree with Henryk Machoń (2021), who argues that religion, unlike sport, "calls (...) its followers to important and lasting sacrifices, renunciations and even sacrifices, which is difficult to see (...) in the case of sport" (p. 202).

The difference in the transformative potential of sport and religion outlined here is due to the fact that sport does not offer a conception of human nature and its condition in the world, and therefore the conceptual resources that enable a narrative understanding of our lives. To put it differently, sport does not provide a moral diagnosis of the fall of man and, therefore, ways to overcome it through spiritual development. Christian Bromberger (1995, p. 311) points to this difference between sport and religion in a very suggestive way. A similar view is also expressed by Machoń. He notes that the main difference between sport and religion are the "cognitive contents" contained in religious doctrines concerning a comprehensive vision of reality (Machoń, 2021). These contents constitute a condition of the possibility of religious experience and as such determine its character.

Should we therefore conclude that there is an irreducible essence of religious emotions? I am adopting here the position advocated by William James (1978), who rejects the essentialism of religious emotions postulated by Schleiermacher and Otto. According to James, it is not the case that there is a specifically religious feeling or a group of such feelings that would only arise when we come into contact with the sacred. As James (1978) writes:

There is religious fear, religious love, religious joy, and so forth. But religious love is only man's natural emotion of love directed to a religious object; (...) there is no ground of assuming a simply abstract 'religious emotion' to exist as a distinct elementary mental affection by itself, present in every religious experience without exception. (p. 46)

Repudiating essentialism about religious feelings does not mean, as Bain-Selbo suggests, that they can be equated with feelings evoked by a sports spectacle. The difference between the two is, as James shows, due to their intentionality, that is, the fact that they are directed towards different objects. Taking into account the object of our experiences allows us to go beyond Bain-Selbo's general description of religious emotions.

Before exploring this issue, however, I would like to address the question of the importance of emotions in religious life. For one could accuse my considerations of making a precipitous assumption about the important role of the emotional factor in religious life. Are emotions therefore important in being a deeply religious person? Any religion that calls its adherents to a profound transformation of life must consider the emotional dimension of our existence. The ability to name and articulate emotions is a necessary condition for spiritual growth, for conversion. If religious faith is to be alive and is to shape the daily lives of followers, it cannot ignore the emotional factor. The importance of emotions in the religious life of human beings is the subject of analysis by Robert Roberts (2021) in his entry *Emotions in the Christian Tradition* in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. As he claims "Emotions are important to adherents of a religion because, like the actions that they sometimes motivate, they are expressions of the moral and spiritual life enjoined by the religion. They constitute an important part of the substance of the religious life. For this reason, teachers of the religion, as guardians and regulators of the life in question, sometimes formulate criteria of genuineness of religious emotions."

Roberts relies on the assumption that the analysis of religious emotions must refer to a specific religion. Therefore he characterizes the emotions presented in the New Testament (joy, gratitude, remorse, repentance, compassion, fear, sorrow, pride, contempt, envy) and the behavior of individuals related to them. According to Roberts (2021), the criterion for the religiosity of these emotions is that they are *theology-laden*, i.e., based on a particular conception of the divine.

The various Christian emotions reflect ideas about God, the features attributed to Him, and the human condition. Reflecting on the Christian meaning of gratitude, Roberts (2021) argues that “The grateful person willingly, even gladly, acknowledges his indebtedness to—dependence on—a benefactor. (...) The attributes of God that especially come into play in the emotion of gratitude are God’s creation and providence for our present life and God’s work of redeeming us from sin in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

Unlike sports experiences, religious emotions do not focus on what is happening “here and now,” but capture the dynamics of our life attitude in a narrative way. Danièle Hervieu-Léger draws attention to this difference between sport and religion. She notes that both phenomena have meaning-making character. However, whereas religion as “ritualized anamnesis” is firmly rooted in the past and refers to the eternal, sport privileges what happens in the moment, i.e., during a sporting event. In this way, the quintessence of sport is relegated to the present. As Hervieu-Léger writes, “The particular nature of this mode of producing meaning, which operates in high-level competitive sport, is that it functions *in the moment*, in the immediacy of the gathering in a kind of corporate emotional awareness” (p. 103).

The intrinsic characteristics of sporting events (one-off, unpredictable, competitive, ludic, periodic) are closely linked to the nature of the experiences they involve. Sporting events are therefore unpredictable—their outcome and course are essentially open to question. They are also characterized by a one-off nature that makes each event different, unique, and unrepeatable. The rivalries that constitute them give rise to strong loyalties on the one hand and divisions and hostilities on the other. While some people take sport deadly seriously, this must not blind us to its essentially ludic character. While the anticipation of a sporting event (periodization) is an important part of the experience for fans and athletes alike, the right moment for the culmination of sporting emotions is when the games are being played. All this makes sport emotions strong and intense, but short-lasting. They are accompanied by a sense of drama, in which seriousness is mixed with a desire for entertainment, and the euphoria of victory is interchangeable with the bitterness of defeat (Bromberger, 1995, Machoń, 2021).

The picture is different with religious experiences. The emotions they evoke tend to be less intense and more long-lasting. Here I agree with John Hick (2007), who notes that “the greater part of religious experience

occurs below the level of the dramatic or highly charged” (p. 28). Religious experiences are also associated with solemnity and reflection, and the ludic element, if even present, cannot be considered dominant. For the overriding purpose of religious experience is contact with the deity; contact that is supposed to lead to spiritual transformation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it must be said that—contrary to Bain-Selbo’s position—we have no good reasons to claim that sports experiences and religious experiences can be equated. The difference between sports experiences and religious experiences is mainly determined by the fact that they are directed towards fundamentally different objects. A necessary condition for talking about religious emotions is to capture them by means of—to use another term taken from Geertz—“thick description” (Geertz, 1973, pp. 3–32). This allows us to penetrate their specificity and thus see that they cannot be identified with sporting experiences. The fundamental flaw in Bain-Selbo’s approach is that in his analyses he limits himself to depicting both religious emotions and sporting experiences by means of a “thin description.” However, the fact that sporting experiences are sometimes described using concepts drawn from the language of religious experience does not in any way imply a thesis of the identity of these experiences. Religious language presupposes a certain ontology that is absent in non-religious contexts.

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Citation

Barnat, D. Emotional experiences in the context of religion and sport. *Analiza i Egzystencja*, 65 (1), 51–71. <https://doi.org/10.18276/aie.2024.65-04>.