

## World Cup Reflections: Religion (But Mostly) Conflict and Peace

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That sport can function as a kind of civil religion is both a truism and a subject of scholarly analysis. Given the central contribution of the Barcelona Football Club to Spain's World Cup victory in July, a noteworthy recent example of such scholarship is "Soccer, Civil Religion, and Public Relations: Devotional-Promotional Communication and Barcelona Football Club,"<sup>[1]</sup> by Jordi Xifra, a public relations theorist at the University of Gerona. Whether sport is a force for conflict or peace (or largely irrelevant to either) is contested, and indeed evidence can be accumulated for several contradictory arguments. Baron de Coubertin, central to the nineteenth-century revival of the Olympic games, idealized sport's capacity to promote understanding and peace across cultures, and yet the Olympics have never been exempt from contemporary conflicts. After World War II, the Olympics sometimes seemed to be the continuation of the Cold War by other means. The most dramatic Olympic violence derived from other political sources, however. At the 1956 Melbourne Olympics, held shortly after the Soviet Union invaded Hungary to suppress rebellion, the intra-Empire water polo match between those countries was so vicious that it is remembered as the "blood in the water" match. Far more ominously, in 1972 the Palestinian terrorist group Black September used the televised world stage provided by the Olympics to take Israeli athletes hostage in hopes of securing the release of Palestinian prisoners. Instead a shoot-out left the nine hostages, five Black September members, and a policeman dead. Despite these examples and many more, however, sport can play a role in promoting peace. The recent soccer World Cup held in South Africa, the first on that continent, provided a welcome if modest example of sport, both marking and contributing to post-conflict nation-building, as indicated by capacity and cohesion.

Not everyone thought the World Cup would be good for South Africa. Reflecting in May 2010 on what the World Cup would mean for the country, Brian Konkol, an American Lutheran working in South Africa, acknowledged his eager anticipation "as a fan of international soccer," but, he asked,

What benefit will the 2010 FIFA World Cup have for South African citizens? Yes, one can find examples of a few development projects surrounding the tournament, but what about ... the long-term? Will the quality of education in South Africa increase, or will less funding be allocated as South Africa pays off its bloated stadium construction debt? What will happen to the 70,000 workers who no longer have stadiums to build? ... Whereas foreign business leaders and a small number of well-connected South Africans will reap incredible rewards long after the closing ceremony in July, the debt repayment process will most certainly leave its most negative impact upon the poor and marginalized throughout the nation.<sup>[2]</sup>

Reasoning in a similar vein, Allen Goddard, Director for Theology and Citizenship at A Rocha South Africa, an environmental organization, announced his personal boycott of the World Cup: "There is a time to play in fairness and integrity and a time to laugh in the freedom of truth and deep joy but it is not time for these in South Africa right now."<sup>[3]</sup>

While the big picture and the long-term matter, they should not obscure what South Africa achieved in successfully hosting the World Cup. National capacity would inevitably be tested by the demands of hosting the most popular sporting event in the world; that this was the first World Cup in Africa raised the stakes. Exhibiting attitudes hard to disassociate from residual colonialism and current racism, some international media commentators doubted South Africa's ability to get stadiums ready on time, to manage the logistics of this month-long event, and to maintain security for hundreds of thousands of visiting fans. Perhaps the most inane bit of pre-World Cup speculation came courtesy of the English Daily Star, which announced two months before the event started that "England fans could be caught up in a machete race war at the World Cup in South Africa."<sup>[4]</sup> In light of such attitudes, success or failure would reflect not only on South Africa's capacity but on all of Africa. And in truth, in terms of logistics and fan security, the World Cup was a great success. The stadiums, both new and renovated, were superb, and, barring a few small glitches, the event ran smoothly. As for

security, fans were at least as safe as at any other international sporting event.

Beyond these basic, practical considerations, South Africans demonstrated another kind of national capacity, more elusive but equally important, in the enormous pride they took in hosting the world. Joe Sawatzky, for five years a Mennonite Mission Network worker in Mthatha in the Eastern Cape province, relates a telling story.<sup>[5]</sup> Walking to the church where they worship in Mandela Park, an impoverished township on the edge of Mthatha, Joe and his (white) family met a group of young (black) men. Mandela Park is a community where few white people are ever seen, so the young men, coming up with the only explanation they could fathom, exclaimed, "Is it the World Cup already? We like to see you here!"<sup>[6]</sup> These young men will in no way profit from the World Cup being in South Africa, and yet they wanted to participate by welcoming outsiders. Visitors from around the world reported a similar warmth of welcome. Wrote one proud South African, "There is nothing like being in South Africa this June and July. The vibe and energy is indescribable. The sense that we are pulling this off against all odds, when just sixteen years ago we were coming out of Apartheid, is phenomenal."<sup>[7]</sup>

"Vibe and energy" are ephemeral, of course, and yet during my three weeks in World Cup-gripped South Africa, they were so vivid as to seem substantial and to demand some account. "Vibe and energy" raise the questions, what is the value of play? Of a nation at play? Of nations at play together? For beneath every manifestation of manipulating, co-opting, and perverting, that is what the World Cup, and all sport, is: play. In one sense, the reward of play is simply joy, and requires no further explanation. Joy is the reason every athlete was first captivated by his sport, and every fan, too; and if sport comes to be about many other things as well, some of them unsavory, sport's capacity to inspire joy remains fundamental to its appeal.

If play is first and fundamentally about joy, play is often doing some kind of work, also. During the World Cup, that work seemed to involve both national and international cohesion. My family, eleven of us spread across three generations and aged ten months to fifty-five years, attended one game, Nigeria vs. South Korea, in Durban. Even on the day, it was impossible (for a rather theologically-oriented family) to miss the way in which the whole experience served as an eschatological metaphor and suggested a kind of benign civil religion, a binding of the nations. Attending a match was inevitably a pilgrimage: driving to parking points around Durban, transferring to a first shuttle bus and then a second before a long walk to the stadium. The first shuttle was a bus ride, but the second was an experience. It was packed with probably eighty people or more from many nations, principally South Africans, but a fair number of Nigerians and other Africans, a few Europeans and North Americans, and two or three South Koreans. With Nigeria one of the last African teams having a chance to qualify for the second round of the World Cup, the mostly-African passengers were loud and demonstrative in their support for Nigeria. Shortly after we started, a South African man near the front of the bus stood up and turned around, beaming, to face the rest of us and offer a rambling and apparently spontaneous welcoming speech. His purpose was to unite Africa and the world in the beauty of the game, and yet his enthusiasm for Nigeria caused him from time to time to interrupt himself, mid-sentence, and launch choruses of "Nigeria wenzanjani?" (Nigeria, what are you doing?), which the whole bus immediately joined in rocking, raucous harmony. The passion was about joy, however, and therefore entirely peaceful. I cannot imagine that the few South Koreans could have felt the slightest sense of threat.

The second shuttle still left us with a long walk to the stadium, probably at least a mile. We began walking on a street barred to traffic, and soon the magnificent new Moses Mabhida stadium came into view. It was open at the end from which we approached and therefore appeared brilliantly lit against the night sky. Still far away, we entered a broad marble walk way, where we joined an ever-increasing throng. There we were: the nations walking together in joyful anticipation to what was easily seen as a city of light set on a hill. To be there was a privilege and delight, and I have to think that it is good for a nation to host and experience such a thing, however ephemeral it may be.

The World Cup also served as an indicator of race relations sixteen years into the post-apartheid era. In South Africa, rugby has long been an all but exclusively white sport in its participants and fans, and soccer has been in this way rugby's mirror image, an overwhelmingly black sport. Attitudes of whites toward soccer and blacks toward rugby have tended to range from indifference to disdain to hostility. Rugby was so enmeshed with the apartheid system that it was effectively "apartheid at play" (and thus subject to

an international boycott from the late 1970s through 1991), and if black South Africans acknowledged rugby at all, they were as likely to support the opposition as they were the Springboks (as the South African rugby team is known). Nelson Mandela, however, famously used the 1995 rugby World Cup, held in South Africa and the first one in which the post-apartheid Springboks were allowed to play, as a creative and startling exercise in nation-building, supporting the Springboks, wearing their jersey, and encouraging black South Africans to support “their” team.<sup>[8]</sup>

The 2010 World Cup offered white South Africans a chance to reciprocate by supporting “their” national soccer team, known as the Bafana Bafana (“the boys”). And many white South Africans did support their team and the World Cup generally. In my three weeks in South Africa, I witnessed some small but telling examples myself. To support their team and the World Cup generally, the South African government encouraged South Africans to wear the Bafana Bafana jersey on Fridays, so I was struck, attending a medical clinic, when the all white staff in a mainly white town did exactly that. Later we vacationed in a little tourist town frequented by many South Africans, including Afrikaners. Coming out of a shop one evening, I saw an Afrikaner family pull up in their typical farm truck, Mom and Dad in the front, three children in the open bed, and flying from each corner, South African flags—the flag of the new South Africa, post-apartheid South Africa, the would-be rainbow nation. In one sense these are the smallest of symbols of identification, and yet they would have been most unlikely only a few years ago.

It is not only my tourist’s perspective that South Africa during the 2010 World Cup observed scenes close to unimaginable until very recently. Jonathan Jansen is the first black rector of the University of the Free State and an important, plain-speaking analyst of race and reconciliation in South Africa. Far from romanticizing the World Cup, he observed that the World Cup revealed two South Africas. One is “bitter, cynical, dismissive, ... angry,” and fearful that post-apartheid South Africa will succeed, thus disproving their racist convictions. This South Africa is mostly but not exclusively white. There is another South Africa, however, black but also white. This South Africa, a majority he believes, recognizes the daunting challenge of addressing the legacy of colonialism and apartheid, but it also “remains stubbornly hopeful” and willing to “acknowledge and celebrate our progress as a nation,” some of it stimulated by the World Cup.<sup>[9]</sup>

Jansen took particular delight in a rugby match that acquired special meaning when shifted out of its usual course by the requirements of the soccer World Cup. The annual Super 14 rugby competition, involving teams from the dominant rugby nations of New Zealand, South Africa, and Australia, is probably the toughest league in the world, and hugely popular. The home stadium for Pretoria’s Blue Bulls rugby team is historic Loftus Versfeld, which seats 43,000. In May, however, when the Blue Bulls hosted the Super 14 semifinals and finals, the need to prepare Loftus Versfeld for the soccer World Cup sent the competition, and tens of thousands of white fans, to another stadium in Soweto—and Soweto, says Jansen, “is not only a physical place; it is also symbolic terrain,”<sup>[10]</sup> due to its formidable role in resistance to apartheid. It is the archetypal black township, and for most white South Africans as foreign, and intimidating, as any place could be. While all manner of trouble might have been anticipated, the event was marked instead by the graciousness of black Sowetans in hosting the mostly white rugby fans, and the gracious response and behavior of those fans. May 30, the date of the Super 14 final, was “the most significant non-racial celebration” in South Africa since Mandela’s creative appropriation of the 1995 rugby World Cup to build the rainbow nation. In fact, Jansen exulted, “There is no denying that with last Saturday’s final ... the political ground shifted in South Africa.”<sup>[11]</sup>

Perhaps the “stubbornly hopeful” South Africa shall be vindicated. I will leave the last word to John de Gruchy, one of South Africa’s premier theologians and a long-time (white) anti-apartheid activist. In the immediate aftermath of the World Cup, as part of the weekly eucharist service at the Volmoed Christian Community Centre, a retreat and conference center, de Gruchy offered this meditation:

Today we give thanks for a remarkably successful Football World Cup. The prayers of many for a peaceful month of celebration have been answered. Now we have to get on with life, no longer feeling it is here,<sup>[12]</sup> but certainly feeling grateful that it has been here and that we shared in it. ... We all know, however, that the eventual success of the World

Cup will be judged not just by what was achieved during the past month, but what is achieved as a result on and off the field in the years to come. The “nay-sayers” have been proved wrong thus far; let us pray that they will be proved equally wrong in the days ahead. Viva the World Cup! Viva! <sup>[13]</sup>

1. <sup>1</sup> Jordi Xifra, “Soccer, Civil Religion, and Public Relations: Devotional–Promotional Communication and Barcelona Football Club.” *Public Relations Review* 34, no. 2 (June 2008): 192-198.
2. <sup>2</sup> Brian Konkol, “Opinion: The 2010 FIFA World Cup: Will South Africa ‘Score’?” Anabaptist Network in South Africa, 14 May 2010,  
[http://anisa.org.za/news/20100514/opinion\\_2010\\_fifa\\_world\\_cup\\_will\\_south\\_africans\\_%E2%80%9Cscore%E2%80%9D](http://anisa.org.za/news/20100514/opinion_2010_fifa_world_cup_will_south_africans_%E2%80%9Cscore%E2%80%9D).
3. <sup>3</sup> Allen Goddard, “A Time to Mourn,” The Anabaptist Network in South Africa, 3 June 2010,  
[http://anisa.org.za/news/columns/tillitisnew/time\\_mourn](http://anisa.org.za/news/columns/tillitisnew/time_mourn).
4. <sup>4</sup> Steve Hughes, “World Cup Machete Threat,” Daily Star, 5 April 2010,  
<http://www.dailystar.co.uk/posts/view/129402/WORLD-CUP-MACHETE-THREATWORLD-CUP-MACHETE-THREATWORLD-CUP-MACHETE-THREATWORLD-CUP-MACHETE-THREAT>.
5. <sup>5</sup> For purposes of full disclosure, Joe is also my son-in-law.
6. <sup>6</sup> Joe Sawatzky, “Feel it ... it is here,” Anabaptist Network in South Africa, 19 May 10,  
[http://anisa.org.za/news/columns/joe\\_sawatzky/feel\\_it\\_it\\_here](http://anisa.org.za/news/columns/joe_sawatzky/feel_it_it_here).
7. <sup>7</sup> Cori Wielenga, “Feel it, it is here,” Anabaptist Network in South Africa (website), 7 July 2010,  
[http://anisa.org.za/news/20100706/blog\\_feel\\_it\\_it\\_here](http://anisa.org.za/news/20100706/blog_feel_it_it_here).
8. <sup>8</sup> The story is well told in the movie *Invictus*, which is based on the book *Playing the Enemy: Nelson Mandela and the Game That Changed a Nation* by John Carlin (Penguin, 2008), a British journalist with long experience of writing about South African politics.
9. <sup>9</sup> Jonathan Janzen, “Opinion: Cup brings out our true colors—It reveals a country divided into heroes and pessimists,” Anabaptist Network in South Africa, 1 July 2010,  
[http://anisa.org.za/news/20100701/opinion\\_cup\\_brings\\_out\\_our\\_true\\_colours%E2%80%94it\\_reveals\\_country\\_divided\\_heroes\\_and\\_pessimis](http://anisa.org.za/news/20100701/opinion_cup_brings_out_our_true_colours%E2%80%94it_reveals_country_divided_heroes_and_pessimis).
10. <sup>10</sup> Jonathan Janzen, “Even Sowetans get the Blues: The Stormers lost, but grace and optimism triumphed,” Anabaptist Network in South Africa, 3 June 2010,  
“[http://anisa.org.za/news/20100603/even\\_sowetans\\_get\\_blues\\_stormers\\_lost\\_grace\\_and\\_optimism\\_triumphed](http://anisa.org.za/news/20100603/even_sowetans_get_blues_stormers_lost_grace_and_optimism_triumphed).”
11. <sup>11</sup> Jonathan Janzen, “Even Sowetans get the Blues: The Stormers lost, but grace and optimism triumphed,” Anabaptist Network in South Africa, 3 June 2010,  
[http://anisa.org.za/news/20100603/even\\_sowetans\\_get\\_blues\\_stormers\\_lost\\_grace\\_and\\_optimism\\_triumphed](http://anisa.org.za/news/20100603/even_sowetans_get_blues_stormers_lost_grace_and_optimism_triumphed).
12. <sup>12</sup> “Feel it, it is here” was first the World Cup tagline for the South African Broadcasting Corporation, but it became the omnipresent World Cup slogan.
13. <sup>13</sup> John W. de Gruchy, “Beautiful Game,” Anabaptist Network of South Africa, 16 July 2010,  
[http://anisa.org.za/news/columns/john\\_w\\_de\\_gruchy/beautiful\\_game](http://anisa.org.za/news/columns/john_w_de_gruchy/beautiful_game).