Olympism as a Civil Religion?*

Frank Kühn
University of Mainz
frank.kuhn@gmx.de

Abstract

Terms like pseudo-religion or quasi-religion are often used to describe the implications of the idea of Olympism. In the article it is researched whether the concept of civil religion presents the Olympic idea in a more approachable way. Due to the fact that the controversial term "civil religion" has often been defined in many different ways, this study is not based on one specific definition, but rather on four different conceptions which have proven essential within the discussion about "c.r.". With the help of these four conceptions Coubertin`s fundamental thoughts on Olympism are analyzed.

Introduction

The Olympic Games are often portrayed as a "quasi-religious" phenomenon, as a substitute or "pseudo-religion". At the same time, it is pondered over whether such a description is adequate when considering the true nature of the Games and their Olympic character. Hence, the question arises if the Olympic idea can possibly be attributed to the concept of a "civil religion", a construct whose definition differs in several ways from the concepts mentioned before. Although the term "civil religion" is usually applied in the political sphere, it has some functional features that indeed justify the attempt to apply it to the field of sports – more specifically, to the Olympism of Pierre de Courbetin, the founder of the modern Olympic Games.

Theoretical basis: conceptions of a civil religion

In order to examine any potential characteristic features of a civil religion in Courbetin's Olympism, different conceptions of civil religion will be considered in the following. In this context, particular importance was attributed to approaches that are considered fundamental in the ongoing debate on civil religion beginning in the 1960s. This was done against the background that the concept of civil religion had been disputed ever since its introduction, both from a terminological and a content point of view.[1] It is often noted that there are as many definitions of civil religion as authors writing about it, or "social contexts" (Schieder, 1987, p. 19), where reference is made to it. This ambiguity of its definition makes it impossible to simply choose one of the various attempts at defining civil religion when applying the idea of civil religion to another subject area, and adopt it as a working definition. Instead, several accepted concepts should be selected and compared to each other in order to eventually obtain the broadest possible range of essential and characteristic features of a civil religion.

In this sense, the following conceptions of civil religion were finally selected:

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1 In the underlying framework, the raison d'être of the term "civil religion" cannot be discussed. Concerning this aspect, please see Vögele (1994, 222). Furthermore, there is a problem with classifying the original English term "civil religion" as opposed to the German term "Zivilreligion", with literature offering distinctively diverging views on this issue. Consequently, as there is no fixed rule for the terminological use of this term, and we cannot undertake a detailed analysis of it here, the two terms will be used as synonyms in the following.

1) American sociologist Robert N. Bellah's approach reignited the discussions on the existence of a civil religion in the USA of the 1960s. He was the one who used the term civil religion for the first time in reference to Jean-Jacques Rousseau (cf. Bellah, 1986).

2) The position of the philosopher Hermann Lübbe from Zürich, who is at times referred to as the most prominent German-speaking theoretician of civil religion (cf. Schieder, 1996), deserves attention due to its broad acceptance (cf. Lübbe, 1986). The participation in Olympic and Paralympic research and promotional events.

3) The value-based concept of Niklas Luhmann, sociologist and student of Parsons', who provided the first reception of Bellah's approach in Germany at the end of the 1970s, gave impetus to the German-language debate on civil religion (Luhmann, 1986).

4) The study project of the Lutheran World Federation was carried out with the participation of international scientists and was therefore less "burdened" by national influences. This accommodates the intention to present less country-specific and rather general features of civil religion. The Lutheran World Federation organised several conferences on this topic between 1981 and 1987 against the background of the international study programme "The Churches and Civil Religion" under the leadership of the Hungarian theologian Béla Harmati(Harmati, 1987).

Due to length constraints of this paper, these concepts cannot be presented in detail. In the course of researching the different contributions to the discussion on civil religion, first, the main features of civil religion were extracted author by author and then compared and finally systematically organised. This systematic organisation resulted in the following overview:

Table 1. Definition and constitutive features of a civil religion

(*+ existing; – rejected; (–) not mentioned*)[2]

	Features	Bellah	Lübbe	Luh-mann	LWB
Identification	• Identification with national symbols → national solidarity	+	–	+	–
	• Institutional expression of symbols, rituals and publicly present common convictions beyond the power of the church (also in the form of holidays, memorial places and "sanctuaries")	+	+	+	+
	• Recourse to national history	+	(–)	(–)	+
	• Expression of national self-perception	+	+	+	+
	• Minimalization of contents formulated as confessions → contents of faith can universally be agreed upon	(–)	+	+	(–)
Integration	• Integration due to the growing polarisation in society	+	+	+	+
	• A bond between citizens and civic experiences of belonging	+	+	+	+
	• Society as a construct of collective consciousness	+	+	+	+
Value orientations	• Fundamental values as well as less formalised values (e.g. fairness) as a civil religion	(–)	(–)	+	(–)
	• Definition of value ideas by organised social systems → value orientations not coincidental or random • Civil religion as a basic value orientation that connects a people in joint public acts	(–)	(–)	+	+
	• Civil religion as a basis for different equal societal subsystems, where only one of them is the state	–	–	+	(–)
Cross-system and system-inherent interrelations	• Use of religion in the political sphere	+	+	–	–
	• Crucial role of civil religious values in the development of institutions	+	+	(–)	–
	• The state as control centre of societal development	+	–	–	(–)
	• Civil religion as an instrument of rationalisation and pragmatisation of politics	+	+	–	–
	• Civil religion only related to politics	+	+	–	–
	• Legitimation of the institutions and representatives	+	+	(–)	–
	• Political unification	+	+	(–)	(–)
	• Re-moralisation of politics	+		(–)	(–)
Transcendence and relation to religion	• God as a central symbol and condition	+	–	(–)	(–)
	• Civil religion as one of many religions → Separation of functions	+	–	–	–
	• No particular denomination	+		+	+
	• Not identical to other religions	–	+	+	+
	• Not subject to control by institutionalised religions	+	–	+	+
	• Macrosocial basis for other religions	–	+	+	(–)
	• Civil religion as the smallest interdenominational or interreligious common denominator	–	+	+	(–)

2 If there was no information on a feature and this information could not be concluded from the general context, the related category was marked with a "(–)" sign. However, as the mentioned characteristics are solely derived from the respective literature on the topic of "civil religion". The comment "not mentioned" does not automatically mean that the respective element is to be excluded from the respective conception.

The classification of civil religion's features into the categories of "national and group-specific identification" (only referred to as "identification" due to the lack of space in the table), "integration following societal disintegration" ("integration"), "value orientations", "cross-system and system-inherent interdependence" and "transcendence and relation to religion" can be derived from the literature's thematic focuses and is considered to be appropriate in this context. In the following, the categories mentioned will be investigated in detail. The different characteristics of civil religion as listed in the table are presumed to be known.

Olympism from the point of view of civil religion

National and group-specific identification

"Identification" is an aspect that forms a significant and indispensable element of a civil religion. Coubertin's way of thinking also considers elements that are identity-forming, such as national flags to honour a victory, being part of the Olympic Games, as well as common rituals or the reference to the "athletic" past in Ancient Olympia. Coubertin lived in an era that was characterised by advancing societal pluralism, which led to a "need to find sense and a collective identity in a world disenchanted by Enlightenment and the modernisation process" (Unfried, 1999, p. 7). The resulting tendencies of alienation could be counteracted by a sense of belonging to a form of "Olympic community", a potential that is inherent in Olympism.

A substantial feature of a civil religion in this respect is to place the past into a continuum with the present and the future. Coubertin clearly takes a stand on history when he says that "celebrating the Olympic Games is reclaiming history" (Coubertin, 1966a [1935], p. 154). By referring to history, he uses the civil religious postulate that no society can do without a number of accepted traditions, also considering the need to restore the potential for identification that had been lost during the 19th century, a rather difficult era for France. Recourse to history still plays an important role today – for example at the Olympics opening ceremony.

Civil religion, too, is always an expression of national self-conception. Success in sports on the international level tends to trigger feelings of national pride in citizens. The public identifies

with the athletes, and this ethos is also extended to the homeland. The success of a single athlete who competes for the glory of sport and the honour of the team – as goes the wording of the Olympic oath – will be celebrated as a collective achievement. Coubertin himself encourages such emotions when proclaiming the motto that commitment to sports means an identical dedication to the homeland (Coubertin, 1966a [1894]). In Coubertin's concept of *religio athletae*, God is factually replaced by the homeland, and the national flag is considered as a symbol of modern patriotism.

Coubertin was also aware of the dangers of the form of nationalism that glorifies the nation, but he did not consider the national sentiment itself to be unhealthy, provided that it came together with a true feeling of cosmopolitanism. H. Lenk points to a tight intertwining of national and international factors already during the first days of the modern Olympic Games' genesis and protocol. To this he adds Coubertin's quote stating that this dual nature of the Olympic movement endows it with a peculiar superiority because the movement can grow deeper socially while simultaneously spreading on the international level as well (Lenk, 1982).

Regarding the international character of the games, Coubertin uses the term "cosmopolitanism", which inspires a comparison with Bellah. Bellah repeatedly focuses on the concept of *world civil religion*, i.e. a civil religion that could be acknowledged and followed on a global level (cf. Bellah, 1986). In this sense, the aspect of national identification would turn into its opposite: global identification and world-wide solidarity. The symbols and rituals needed for such a *world civil religion* would undoubtedly be present in the framework of the Olympic Games ceremony. The Olympic rings for example, designed by Coubertin in 1914, symbolising the different continents, are one of the best-known symbols in the world. Hence, they would be suitable for that purpose due to their inherent symbolic meaning: the "power of Olympia to encompass all continents" (Lenk, 1964, p. 23).

In this sense, all Olympic opening ceremonies traditionally share the aspect of identification and the concept of integration. Indeed, the ritual acts that form part of the opening ceremony (such as the torch relay, the hoisting of the Olympic flag and the Olympic anthem) can be said to have civil religious characteristics. The minimalisation of the contents of a civil religion that are formulated as confessions – as postulated by Lübbe and Luhmann – and the universal consensus it renders

possible are in line with Coubertin's approach in this respect. In principle, Lübbe is sceptical of the above-mentioned universal approach and sees civil religion rather as a "phenomenon of culture bound by national politics" (Lübbe, 2001, p. 34). Indeed, it is not only the Olympic symbols, but also the national ones that influence the atmosphere of the Olympic ceremony (Lenk, 1964). The appearance of former heavyweight box world champion Muhammad Ali as the last torch bearer in Atlanta, for example, was undoubtedly a symbolic act of national identification. In the USA, Ali is cherished as an idol by people from all social classes. This shows that sometimes it is not the ceremonial acts themselves that bear civil religious features, but the choice of persons performing them. In such a case, the person functions as an integrative figure of identification, too.

The function of the recurring patterns of the Olympic ceremony should not be underestimated. The regular activation of the emotions evoked by the symbols is of utmost importance. In the context of the regular evocation of communal emotions, Durkheim talks about a collective effervescence, "an ecstatic 'state of mind', which can only be reached through the jointly executed rite" (Hase, 2001, p. 199). In addition to symbols, rites, ceremonies and celebrations are further tools that help members of society to find a common reference point through collective experiences (Hildebrandt, 2001). Ritual acts constitute and activate a sense of social belonging and illustrate normative general orientations. Sports involve plenty of rituals and are largely based on them. Just like symbols, rituals can also generate community spirit and a festive mood. In this way, they constitute a part of social control (Weis, 1991).

Going back to the thought of a *world civil religion*, one can experience such collective euphoria at the Olympic opening ceremony, for instance. As the viewers cheer for all the athletes entering the stadium, this euphoric feeling does not really seem to target the own nation, but rather the common celebration of the Games as such. However, Coubertin's wish for the applause to "be in a relation to the achievement" and to take place "without any national bias" (Coubertin, 1966a [1935], p. 152) appears to be an idealisation because the individual viewer will usually be more enthusiastic about the entering or victory of his or her own nation.

All in all, it can be declared that the characteristics of a civil religion, subsumed according to the different definitions that

were taken as a starting point, can – in principle – all be applied to the identity-forming elements of the Olympic idea. However, when applying the concept of identification to Olympism, the question whether people tend to identify with the Olympic thought or the nation instead poses a problem. The significance of this distinction should not be underestimated, because it provides explanation for an apparent contradiction. A newly formed *world civil religion* would have to be able to incorporate a nationally oriented civil religion because otherwise the *world civil religion* would not be able to sustain its claim to be global. The solution might lie in the assumption that an individual can form part of several civil religions (Schieder, 1987). Thus the question arises: can two competing civil religions possibly coexist within the framework of the Olympic Games – but wouldn't that mean that one civil religion would be inferior to the other? Coubertin's idealistic idea that "any emotion that is solely national" has to "take a temporary break" (Coubertin, 1966a [1935], p. 152) on such occasions, is hardly applicable in practice. Consequently, it remains questionable in how far these two different "cult objects" of this potential Olympic civil religion would be compatible with each other.

Integration as a result of societal disintegration

The aspect of "identification" is a necessary preliminary stage to "integration". While integration rather relates to the whole society, the question of identity concerns the individual (Schieder, 1987). The fact that all the different concepts outlined above evaluate the integrative aspect in the same manner shows how important integration is as an element of a civil religion. Societal disintegration, as mentioned in the title of this chapter, is a consequence of social estrangement experienced by individuals in an increasingly differentiated society. This leads to an excessive need for orientation possibilities and starting points for identity-forming "beliefs" that have integrative effects. Individuals want to feel that they are part of a community, thus they look for support in a world that Max Weber calls "disenchanted". At this point, the question arises if Olympism can function as a catalyst of integration. This is what Coubertin himself says in this regard: "Nowadays there is only one kind of cult that can create a lasting bond between citizens: the cult which will emerge with the sport exercises of the young" (Coubertin, 1966a [1918], p. 67).

In relation to the aspect of identification, collective effervescence and a feeling of solidarity evoked by ritual acts have been mentioned before. Civic experiences of belonging, as for instance intended at the opening ceremony in Sydney 2000, form a fundamental condition of the integrative processes in this regard. In 2000, the long-suffering and rather unacknowledged Aborigines occupied an important place in the ceremony, where the 400-meter runner Cathy Freeman was the first Aborigine ever to light the Olympic flame. Thus, for a civil religion, a minimal universal consensus has to be found for the whole society. Such a consensus is the basis of Luhmann's approach and the condition for the attempted integrative effect facilitated by it. According to Coubertin, creating such a realm of emotions, however, was particularly designed for the international framework. Parallel to the increasing international success of the Olympic Games since the years of their re-establishment, the integrative idea must have come to the fore in Coubertin's perception. Whereas in the beginning, the superficial intention was to support national integration, the course of development began to turn towards the concept of international peace.

Hence, a national and an international frame of reference can be distinguished also when it comes to the concept of integration. The question arises if "civil religion, in addition to integrating different groups of society, reaches beyond the 'own' population and helps to overcome nation state borders through the use of supranational or international sets of symbols" (Haydt, 2000, p. 720). Coubertin believed in the possibility of overcoming borders and was reassured in his views by the free character of Olympism, named "multiply compatible" by H. Lenk (cf. Lenk, 1964, p. 15, p. 17). In this regard, the universal consensus within the community is minimised to the smallest possible number of elements. It is probably even more significant with respect to the international integration concept than to the national, due to (amongst others) the different culture-specific characteristics existing around the world.

Coubertin's idea of peace, which should be carried out in the whole world by the athletes and the public, is closely connected and goes hand in hand with internationalisation. In a certain manner, the concept of international peace is the destination point of the integrative thought in the framework of the Olympic idea. For Coubertin, international sports life is "the prime example of a peaceful yet competitive community of peoples

based on mutual respect" (Nigmann, 1996, p. 68). Love for one's home country was perfectly compatible with the desire for peace. According to him, the institution of the Olympic Games could "be an effective, if indirect contributor to ensure world peace" (Nigmann, 1996, p. 70). The key word "mutual respect" has long become a steady element in this respect (cf. Grupe, 1997). O. Grupe points out that the Olympic values of peace, mutual respect and internationality are admittedly not enough to solve conflicts, but they do serve as models "for handling conflicts. Olympic sport definitely presupposes the acceptance of being different". It also succeeds in this "when it consistently opposes discrimination on ground of race, religion and gender" (Grupe, 1997, p. 236). Whatever the significance of the Olympic idea for world peace or the mutual respect of peoples might be, it definitely has the merit of offering an "ethical coordinate system" (Umminger, 1972, p. 13) as a starting point for a universal concept of integration.

The ability to have an integrative effect on the national level is not a specifically Olympic feature, but can be accomplished by sports in general, bringing forth unifying social experiences and emotions inherent in it. At the same time, the possibility to spread these ideas beyond national borders is a much more difficult task than building locally concentrated possibilities for identification and integration, thus not every institution can perform or even stimulate such an action. It can already be regarded as a major accomplishment of Olympism that it provided the foundations for such overarching and transnational ethics, even if their implementation is often deprecated and criticised.

Value orientations

With the exception of Luhmann's concept, the topic of "value orientations" does not occupy a prominent place among the concepts of civil religion examined above. Nevertheless, it should not be neglected, neither with regards to the Olympic idea, nor to the theoretical construct of a civil religion itself. Value orientations provide the substantial basis for a set of conditions, which is a necessary component of all concepts of civil religion. In this sense, value guidelines are a prerequisite for identification. Without concrete moral concepts, identification is impossible, which consequently impedes integration. Value orientations embody a fundamental element of the integrative and identity-forming thought.

H. Lenk characterised the Olympic value concept as formal, functional, abstract, pluralistic and "multiply compatible" (Lenk, 1982, p. 1086) due to the "syncretic diversity" (Lenk, 1964, p. 15) of the Olympic idea. It is this "multiply compatible" attitude of the mindset connected to Olympism that opens up the idea to all kinds of value concepts and hence addresses most diverse areas of society. In this way, "representatives of foreign cultures [...] always find some of their most important values amongst the Olympic ones" (Lenk, 1964, p. 15). In this context, education *through* sports should serve to pass on such basic values. The "issue of acting responsibly" (Bellah, 1986, p. 35) must be addressed early on in people's life. According to Coubertin's suggestions, Olympic education should build a foundation of this kind for action with the help of its inherent value conceptions. Moreover, for Bellah, civil religion is a means to re-moralise politics. In his attempts to reform the educational system, Coubertin held quite similar views (Coubertin, 1972 [1901]).

Olympic sport could only develop on the basis of an "anthropologically valid Olympic value orientation with an educational aim". It was only in this way that "motives and purposes for their sport activities [could be] offered to the athletes, and a framework for action and activity standards to the organisations and institutions of Olympic sports" (Grupe, 1996, p. 25). Thus, it is the responsibility of the educational sector to equip the members of the community with what HERMS calls "ethically oriented reassurances" (Herms, 1997, p. 55). All of the above points in a direction that is regarded as a fundamental value orientation unifying a people in its joint public actions according to the definition of civil religion provided by the Lutheran World Federation (Harmati, 1987). Olympism does not leave these value orientations up to coincidence or to the arbitrary will of the citizens, but it predefines values free of coercion. For example, the value of fair play can be cited here, called "chivalrous spirit" or "spirit of chivalry" by Coubertin. The Olympic Games offer an ideal platform to make as many people as possible acquainted with the subject of the Olympic values.

Furthermore, according to Coubertin, conveying such values is supposed to contribute to a healthy apprehension of democracy. These value-based orientation guidelines are offered by the values inherent in the Olympic idea, such as equal opportunities, the prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of race or

religion, or for political reasons. However, in this case as well, there is a considerable gap between expectations and reality. The Olympic idea can offer an orientation to people with the help of a value framework, but its implementation in everyday life is neither supervised nor imposed onto people. Although there is a possibility to impose sanctions when athletes do not implement or respect the Olympic values, this tool is not available with regards to the public and the bigger crowds.

The Olympic idea is definitely mirrored in the category of "value orientations" as well. In line with the fundamental values and the less formalised values of a civil religion analysed by Luhmann, the Olympic Games no doubt possess some civil religious features. Where Arani considers a civil religion as a precondition for a society based on the "civil basic consensus of non-violence, fairness and tolerance" (Arani, 2001, p. 209), according to this interpretation, Olympism would also have to make use of a civil religious basis, as the values mentioned here are also part of the Olympic value system.

Cross-system and system-inherent interdependence

The category of "Cross-system and system-inherent interdependence" is of existential importance for Coubertin's Olympism. "Interdependence" here refers to the interactions between the different sections of a societal system or between different systems. Such reciprocal influences and interdependences can contribute to the stabilisation of the given section or of another one. At the same time, this category is a type of target domain for a complex of conditions composed of value orientations, identification and integration. The accessibility and, possibly, the success of these interactions strongly depend on the aspects of "identification" and "integration". In contrast to the civil religion criteria discussed so far, the different theories show fundamental conceptual differences in this respect.

The paramount question at this point concerning "Olympism as a civil religion" pertains to the "cross-system" function of civil religion. In principle, most conceptions agree that civil religion has partly legitimising functions "with regards to politics, the state, the community, the common good, democracy and the political culture" (Vögele, 1994, p. 218). Similar legitimising elements can also be found in Coubertin's ideas. France's youth was supposed to learn democracy with the help of a sports – and essentially, also Olympic – education. According to Coubertin, sport is the cradle of

democracy (Coubertin, 1966a [1919]; 1966a [1918]). In addition, a young man should generally be equipped with the respective moral "tools" to master the life ahead of him. Therefore, sports had the task to influence the community through education. The modern "education of the people" was supposed to make a contribution to and lay the foundation of "social pacification" (Grupe, 1996, p. 27; Coubertin, 1966a, p. 10).

According to Coubertin's reflections, sport is not only a legitimising aid for democracy, but also has the mission to help the individual live a morally and physically fulfilled life. In this context, the principle of "sports for everybody" must be mentioned (Müller, 1996). In this sense, physical exercises "can help to forge character, strengthen a community, and even, in democratic times, to provide a link between different social classes" (Coubertin, 1966a [1918], p. 68). These are thus interactions that incorporate both cross-system elements (such as the democratisation of citizens), as well as system-inherent elements (the joy of sports and its beneficial effects on mind and body). In this function, Olympism can indeed be considered as a characteristic feature of a civil religion, which Luhmann refers to as the "basis for different equivalent societal subsystems".

As an example of a transfer from the area of Olympic sports to the political level, one can mention the opening ceremony of the Atlanta Games in 1996, when the "Joint Services' Color Guards" entered the centre of the stadium marching in step during the national part of the ceremony, accompanied by the music of the US Army Herald Trumpets. These were several flag bearers in uniform, representing the four different arms categories: the army, the marine, the air force and the coast guards. After the singing of the American national anthem and the hoisting of the flag, eight F-16 fighter jets of the US Air Force flew over the stadium. The national part of the opening ceremony provides an opportunity for the host country to present itself. What does it mean then if representatives of the military march in step through the stadium, while fighter jets fly over the venue at a big, globally renowned event such as the Olympic Games? It conveys a feeling of national strength, and prevents people from wondering about general instability that is inherent in every system. In this manner, forms of government can be strengthened, rule can be legitimised, and an existing political system can be supported. This also applies to the Olympic Winter Games 2002 in Salt Lake City, where US President George W. Bush arbitrarily added the worlds "on behalf of a proud, determined and graceful nation" to the set phrase at

the opening of the games. Earlier, prominent sportspersons had carried the American national flag into the stadium in a symbolic act together with fire fighters and police officers. The flag had been taken from "Ground Zero", the square where the ruins of the twin towers of the destroyed World Trade Centre could be found after 11 September 2001. Against the background of the current political events at that time, this symbolic act could trigger not only a national, but also an international feeling of solidarity.

Sometimes Olympism and civil religion are both accused of being instrumentalised. Olympism is faced with the question if it is characterised by a principle called "instrumental rationality" by Max Weber; that is, used as a means to an end. Such an instrumental rationality would also be the reason for what here is referred to as "interdependence". K. Weis observes that in modern Olympism, there is a constant change between means and end, where each means used for a positive end became an aim, which in turn required a new means to be achieved[3].

Politics plays an important role in both Bellah's and Lübbe's conceptions because both scholars see the existence of civil religion as dependent on a relation to politics or on the use of religion in the political sphere. In this sense, Olympism would be categorically excluded from being connected to the concept of civil religion according to these two authors. However, it was shown that the Olympic idea and thus the Olympic Games can reach or at least provide a basis for forces of political unification, which is regarded as a characteristic political condition by both authors. To conclude, Olympism also has a number of features characteristic of a civil religion concerning this category, and the conceptions of Luhmann and the World Federation in no way contradict the contents of the Olympic idea.

Transcendence and relation to religion

In order to enable a transfer from Olympic sports to other social systems, Olympic sport must be elevated to the level of a cult. Following the logic of the so-called *Latent Pattern Maintenance* of Parsons´ Four-Function Paradigm, institutions such as the Olympic Games need certain elements to ensure and guarantee their chances to have an impact in the long run (Parsons, 1976). Whether Olympism has transcendental elements and whether it

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3 In relation to this, see the six levels of development according to WEIS (1995, 140) and (1996, 50).

is comparable to conventional religious institutions is inevitably paramount when analysing the idea of Olympism from the civil religious point of view. Since, however, the concept of civil religion strongly depends on the general definition of religion as provided by the author, it should not be surprising that the different conceptions arrive at a relative conceptual agreement when it comes to the first three categories of aspects, but disagree in this case. This is because providing a definition for the analysis of "religion" is a general and fundamental problem.

Coubertin mentions religion on many occasions and in multiple contexts. When doing so, he uses religious vocabulary and imagery abundantly. Amongst others, he talks about peace as a form of religion, honour and altruism as cults, about a sports Gospel, disciples of sports religion, worship at the repeatedly shining Olympic fire, the IOC as a college of priests, and about the competing athlete as a priest and servant of muscle strength, just to give a few examples. God, on the other hand, does not play a decisive role in Coubertin's Olympism, but his existence is not questioned at all. In this context, a significant antagonism between the Olympic idea and the constitutive aspects of a civil religion according to Bellah and Lübbe can be observed. The latter perceive God as a central symbol and prerequisite of a civil religion. Coubertin, however, raises the national flag to become the central symbol of the Olympic mentality. The common faith in gods in Greek antiquity is now replaced by widely accepted patriotism. This spurs Hörrmann to talk about the transcending of sports from the stadium to the state (Hörrmann, 1968). The existence of God is beyond doubt for Coubertin, but it is not a *conditio sine qua non* of his Olympic idea.

According to Coubertin, the "call to the ideal of a higher life" and the "desire for perfection" is best realised through sport training and competition, which at the same time serve as a source of inner perfection for every human being (Coubertin, 1996b [1932]).

This perfection in and through sports, a complete harmony of soul and body can be determined by the concept of "eurhythmics", an antique Greek word that Coubertin loved to use. According to R. Malter, Olympism aims to teach the "Eurhythmics of life", which is tantamount to a physical and sensual "experience of the harmony of body and soul", an "experience of earthly happiness", a "paganism worth to be maintained by humanity, because it is an ideal of the fulfilment of human existence" (Malter, 1996,

p. 11). In this sense, Coubertin's anthropology is based on the glorification of the physical human being, described by Coubertin as "religio athletae" (Malter, 1996, p. 10). It is necessary to view this "religio athletae" also in the above context and not as something competing with the existing institutionalised religions or denominations. Moreover, this should not generate misconceptions or wrong conclusions; the concept of civil religion should not be contrasted with the "religio athletae". The question refers to Olympism as a whole, asking if it is a civil religion, while the "religio athletae" is only a part of the whole. It is a mindset based on the previously discussed value orientations, the "devotion of the athlete, his commitment to moral values as a mindset of merging with Olympic value concepts" (Andrecs, 1990, p. 28). Furthermore, Herms points to the double meaning of the concept "religio athletae", being both a subjective and an objective genitive, "not only for the athlete, but also for the audience, hence for the general public as a whole" (Herms, 1998, p. 496).

Coubertin ignited a new-pagan substitute religion with the modern Olympic Games (Weis, 1996) when he said "the primary, fundamental characteristic of ancient Olympism, and of modern Olympism as well, is that it is a religion" (Coubertin, 1966 [1935], p. 150). The athletes become the disciples of this religion (Coubertin, 1966a [1927]) as well as "priests and servants of the religion of muscle strength" (Coubertin, 1966a [1935], p. 153), and the IOC becomes their "college of priests" (Coubertin, 1966a [1932], p. 144). The place of the national flag in Olympism equals the place of God in Christian faith. Lenk believes that because Olympism lacks transcendence, it can at most be regarded as a secularised type of religion (Lenk, 1964). In order to avoid misunderstandings, he suggests not to use this expression. The term civil religion could probably fill this terminological vacuum and provide a potential alternative in order to solve the problem mentioned here.

The concept of a "macrosocial basis", also mentioned as a feature of civil religion in the table presented at the beginning of this paper, probably describes the essence of Olympism more accurately than attributing qualities of an institutionalised religion to it. The Olympic idea offers value bases related to society as a whole rather than being the private affair of the individual. In this sense, Coubertin's statements all point to something that

Lübbe and Luhmann call the "smallest interdenominational or interreligious denominator" of a civil religion. Bellah, however, rejects this perspective, as he perceives civil religion as one of many religions. Furthermore, civil religion, church religion and private religious convictions do not necessarily have to compete. A religion encompassing the whole society and a church religion operate on different levels (Schieder, 1987; 2001).

The disagreement between the different concepts of civil religion with regards to the relation to religion and transcendence mentioned at the beginning of this chapter will necessarily be apparent when applying it to the Olympic idea in the following. The concepts agree that Olympism is not subject to any denomination and that it lies beyond the control of institutionalised religions, even though it borrows certain elements of the latter. In all concepts, it is a controversial question if civil religion should be regarded as one of many different religions or if it can serve as a macrosocial basis for other religions, thus potentially being the smallest interdenominational denominator. According to Coubertin's line of thought, the answer would be along the line of the latter theory and would thus mean that Olympism is a basic social consensus, as it is "multiply compatible". Hence the value orientations enshrined in the Olympic idea are not to be considered as a closed religious' doctrine, but as a general value basis that extend to other areas of life and are available as an option for all sub-systems.

Conclusions

The various categories that have been employed to examine whether Olympism can be qualified as a civil religion are compatible with the Olympic idea in very different ways. In those categories where the four concepts taken as a basis agree with each other, it is possible to apply the respective characteristics to Olympism without major difficulties. The categories of "identification" and "integration" are characterised by a high degree of conformity between the different conceptions of civil religion and can be likewise consentaneously related to the concept of Olympism. In addition, the question arises if the concept could be expanded beyond the local or national level in the area of identification and become a sort of *world civil religion*. The same is true for the domain of integration, where the concepts

of civil religion were also expanded beyond the national level of a society to the idea of international integration. In this context, however, the problem of the explicit focus and classification of civil religious elements emerges. It is not clear whether the civil religious matter is applied to the nation or to the international institution of the Olympic Games. Furthermore, the idea of two possible civil religions existing parallel to each other – not necessarily competing – has been discussed.

While the concept of "value orientations" can also be incorporated in Olympism, the categories of "cross-system and system-inherent interdependence" and "transcendence and relation to religion" showed considerable discrepancies. There are conceptual differences that strongly influence and determine the possibility of describing Olympism as a civil religion. Hence, the Olympic idea does fulfil functions in a social system that are characteristic features of a civil religion, but Olympism is still excluded by definition because Bellah and Lübbe only consider the existence of a civil religion valid in the context of politics. These two authors also exclude the possibility of Olympism being a civil religion with regards to its relation to religion, because both consider God as a central symbol and a constitutive element of any civil religion. This aspect is not reflected in Olympism, which is based on the cult of the nation with the national flag as its central symbol. Moreover, there are different perceptions as to whether civil religion is one religion among many others or it can also be regarded as the basis for other religions in society as a whole. While Coubertin repeatedly identifies Olympism as a religion, Olympism rather resembles a macrosocial basis.

In conclusion, the question whether Olympism is a civil religion cannot simply be answered by a definitive "yes" or "no". It is beyond doubt that the Olympic idea possesses many, if not almost all, characteristic features of a civil religion. However, when deciding whether Olympism is a civil religion or not, there are some unsurmountable barriers that cannot be ignored. While according to the conceptions of Bellah and Lübbe, Olympism is definitely not a civil religion, the Olympic idea almost entirely satisfies the obligatory features of a civil religion according to the conception of Luhmann and the Lutheran World Federation. Accordingly, the question whether Olympism can be called a civil religion or not depends on how the concept of "civil religion" is defined.

It could be argued that it is not necessary to fulfil each aspect of the description of features. As Hase notes, a civil religion need not necessarily mirror each of the scientific concepts of religion. There is unanimous agreement among religious scholars that variations exist. Therefore, "the fact that the existence of one or the other element cannot be proven" cannot be "an argument against the concept of civil religion" (Hase, 2001, p. 83). Nevertheless, it is not advisable to fall back on such argumentation in a domain that is not clearly defined. Such an approach would have only the result that "every complex of religious convictions and values that fulfils the mentioned integrative and mobilising functions could be called a civil religion" (Layendecker, 1986, p. 70).

Should Olympism be considered a civil religion based on the conceptions of Luhmann and the Lutheran World Federation, the question of the national versus international orientation would still remain unsolved. At the Olympic Games and in Coubertin's view, patriotism and cosmopolitanism may go hand in hand. These aspects would be hard to fulfil for a civil religion that needs a clear orientation. Should the Olympic or the national flag be the central element of the civil religion? Or should Olympism be used or even misused as a platform to represent each country-specific national version of a civil religion? A possible solution might be offered by the theory mentioned above, saying that an individual may adhere to several civil religions at the same time. This would presume a rather broad definition of civil religion. As a result, the national civil religion could indeed be incorporated inside a *world civil religion* – an Olympic *world civil religion*, which would at the same time provide the framework for its national versions.

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Author

Frank Kühn studied Physical Education, English and History at the University of Mainz and at the University of Glasgow from 1997 – 2003. Since 2004 he has been employed as a teacher at a secondary school in Speyer and has become supervisor of the teacher training courses in Physical Education in Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany. He participated at the postgraduate session of the International Olympic Academy in 2002.