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# Soccer's Holy Grail: Interrogating the Preponderance of Fandom over Faith in the age of Globalization

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Every religion has practices and values which help it to retain its adherents and give it a sustainable identity. However, whenever the values of a particular religion appear to no longer satisfy the yearnings of its adherents, a gap is created. With the advent of globalization, many religious practices are being subjected to scrutiny. This article examines the emergence of football (or soccer) in the modern world, describing its evolving influence as a new religion in the secular society. Through the analysis presented, and with participant-observer findings, we show how strong the influence of football has become across the globe, especially in Nigeria. The article reveals that modern football has presented an irresistible attraction to those dissatisfied with religion, and has bonded soccer-loving fans to common goals similar to, or even more intense than, those seen among adherents of religion.<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

In modern times, the commonly accepted definition of religion as a belief in a supernatural power or powers that control human destiny has seen the need for adjustment. Religious belief incorporates the institutions that make the expression of belief possible. Thus the religions of the world have been organized, over the centuries, to cater to the spiritual and psychological needs of their adherents. Modern times have witnessed an overall marked decline in religious beliefs and practices, especially in the developed countries of the world. This decline however, has not stopped popular activities and pastimes being pursued with “religious” zeal and fervor.

## Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative methodology. When investigating a relatively unknown phenomenon, a qualitative study is usually appropriate if there are sufficient resources for review (Hancock & Algozzine 2017). It is an exploratory approach which

allows for a phenomenon to be studied within its context. A qualitative study allows for data from multiple sources to synthesize wide perspectives and allows for an in-depth investigation.

Data for the study was elicited from both primary and secondary sources. The primary source was mainly participant observation of both religious and soccer activities within the study area. The rationale for participant observation was to gather new knowledge on the subject matter. The primary data was supported with secondary data such as literature, magazines from international soccer organizations, media reports and journals. Asika, (2006) has declared that the usefulness of secondary sources of data lies in the fact that information of this sort is collected periodically. Also, gathering of information from such sources does not require the cooperation or assistance of the individual about whom information is being sought. The sources of data for this study include: magazines, newspapers, textbooks, journals and seminar papers among others. Content analysis was adopted as our method of data analysis. The study location is Eastern Nigeria. Eastern Nigeria is a very religious area, with a combination of Christian and traditional worshippers,

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but also is a place where football is followed with great enthusiasm. The data was interpreted through phenomenological analysis and narrative description.

### **Modernity and Modern Times**

Modernity is a complex and multifaceted concept that has been defined and redefined across various disciplines and perspectives. However, in the main it involves a critique of traditional authority, customs, and beliefs, and the pursuit of new forms of knowledge and understanding. It is marked by the differentiation of social institutions, such as the separation of church and state, characterized by critique of tradition, enlightenment values, increasing rationalization, increased global connectivity, cultural exchange, and the emergence of cosmopolitan identities and bureaucratization of social institutions, leading to greater efficiency, predictability, and control. Modernity celebrates the diversity and hybridity of cultures, identities, and lifestyles, the rise of consumer culture, mass media, and popular culture, which shape our perceptions and experiences of the world. Modern times, on the other hand, refer to the contemporary era, which is characterized by diversity, fragmentation, and experimentation, marked by the rise of new forms of art, literature, and music, significant technological, social, economic, and cultural changes; a period of increased cultural exchange and homogenization, driven by technological advancements and globalization. The modern era is marked by the recognition and celebration of diversity, with a focus on promoting inclusivity, tolerance, and social justice.

### **Religion and Globalization**

Globalization in the context of this paper means the speed-up of movements and exchanges of human beings, goods and services, information, capital, technologies and cultural practices all over the world. It has significantly increased and promoted the rate of interaction between populations and regions of the world. Lee and Kim (2016) opine that religious beliefs were among the earliest cultural elements to globalize, being spread by force through conquest, migration, evangelization, colonization and through international relations, trade and commerce. The collapse of colonialism which was followed by globalization led to the development of international corporations, global mass transportation and global mass media under the impact of science and technology. Invariably, since the

1960s and 1970s, new patterns of religion have appeared that reflect a global consciousness. With this have emerged religions shaped by science and technology. Arguably, sports in general and soccer in particular, which draws a large diversity of people and cultures under a common interest, is also a new religion shaped by modernity.

Globalization has also contributed to the alienation of some individuals from their traditions, and has expanded recreational opportunities by spreading music, fashion and sporting activities through the internet and satellite television which provides massive information across geographical boundaries in little time. According to Lee and Kim (2016), in the area of sports, globalization has impacted the way in which sports are organized and conducted, and has also changed people's perception of sporting activities in modern times. The roots of modern sports can be traced to the mid-nineteenth century in Great Britain and the United States of America where the first professional sports were organized in mining and industrial towns and cities. Wright (2002) states that then, competition was done mostly on the local and national level. The first signs of globalization in sports were aided by British colonization and influence which popularized sports such as football, rugby, and cricket in its colonies worldwide. Such sports gradually replaced traditional games. This gradual but steady development led to the formation of the International Olympic Council in 1894 and the first Olympic Games held in Athens in 1896.

As it relates to football, the International Federation of Football Associations (FIFA) was formed in 1904, and the first ever World Cup was held in 1930 in Uruguay. FIFA as a federation has member associations in 209 countries and is one of the most famous examples of institutionalization in the world: its membership exceeds that of the United Nations Organizations (U.N.O.). Globalization in sports was subsequently fueled by the progress made in technology and the commercialization of sports. Print and electronic media exposed sports to a wider international audience, especially television, with the first televised soccer World Cup being held in 1956. This increased involvement of global telecommunication companies allows international sports organizations and federations to generate enormous revenues through the sale of television rights. Television has also aided the promotion of local and national leagues and teams in overseas markets to gain an ever widening audience. Thibault (2009) notes that

the diversity in athletes' origins and participation in national professional leagues has increased around the world, along with the number of countries participating in various sporting events.

### **Soccer as a Religion**

Football, in the context of this paper is the round-leather game played by eleven members of two opposing teams to out-score their opponents in goals past two posts in order to win. Games in the ancient Greek world had significant religious coloration in that they were mostly held in honour of the "gods" of the Greek pantheon, and individual athletes sacrificed and prayed to their favorite gods and goddesses for victory. Likewise, sports in modern times seem to have taken on religious dimensions of their own. According to Barber (2009), psychologists are coming to the conclusion that sports have many of the same effects on spectators as religion does on its adherents. Wann (2001) states that the similarities between sport fandom and organized religion are striking considering the vocabulary associated with both: faith, devotion, worship, ritual, dedication, sacrifice, commitment, spirit, prayer, suffering, festival and celebration. It may seem odd to equate religion with sports entertainment, but it must be understood that before the advent of modern mass communication, religious ceremonies were a source of entertainment for ordinary people who rarely attended a theatre or travelled to a sporting event. Scholars refer to some sports prevalent in an area as "national religion" or "humanistic religion", pointing out that spectators worship other human beings because of their achievements and the groups to which they belong.

Wann (2001) compares sports stadia to "cathedrals" where followers gather to worship their heroes and pray for their success. He states that if rituals may be entertaining, then entertainment as experienced in a sports stadium may be ritualistic when fans wear the team colors and carry its flags, icons and mascots. The ritual then goes on to include the repetitive chanting of team encouragement, hand-clapping, booing the other team, doing the wave, and so forth. He then concludes that the singing of an anthem at a sporting event likely has similar psychological effects as the singing of a hymn in a church.

The activities of sports fans as a group can be said to be religious. In Africa, as religious attendance rates have been dropping drastically in recent decades,

interest in sports spectatorship, especially soccer, has soared significantly. Fans are religiously committed to their favorite sports stars and teams in a way that provides a focus and gives meaning to their daily lives. In drawing the parallels between sports and religion, Wann (2001) notes that sports spectatorship is a transformative experience through which fans escape the stress of daily living just as religious experiences help the faithful to transcend their every day existential problems. In corroboration, Serazio (2013) states that the notion that sports remain modern society's civil religion is truer than we often accept. In fandom, as in religious worship, our social connections are brought to life in the stands as they are in the pews. Emile Durkheim suggested that aboriginal tribes worship their society through totems. Similarly, soccer enthusiasts share and reaffirm their relations with one another through the love of the common team they support. The sports totems, like T-shirts with the images of devotion-drawing celebrities, give the fans the motivation to warm up to and strike up a conversation with strangers. Also, being loyal to the fandom of a particular club can make people challenge others with allegiances to rival teams, treating them with the same attitude of alienation familiar to heretics and apostates in religion.

Block (2009) notes that Durkheim was also preoccupied with the notion of "collective consciousness"—the idea that religion plays an important role in uniting members through the creation of a common consciousness. With the idea of a common consciousness in mind, it is easy to see how sports is a religion, as common consciousness results from the ecstatic communal worship that is seen throughout the sporting world, especially in football where fans unite as one, and even riot for a common goal. One can hear what sounds like worship while attending a sporting event as the stadium roars with the sound of supporting their team, setting the stage for Durkheim's "collective consciousness" to unleash passions in the crowd. This is evident in almost every sport, as passion can blossom into fanaticism and acts of hooliganism.

McLellan (2008), in reference to Karl Marx's religion as "the opiate of the people", asserts that soccer is a new opiate that has arisen for the people, and is in its own way a new religion. He states that football "inspires more devotion and fervor than its tired counterparts that were still mired in the doctrines of yesteryears" (p. 18). As this new phenomenon has gripped people across the world, it has led to the

construction of stadia that in effect become the churches of the religion, where the “faithful” can visit to see the prophets (players) they admire conduct their demonstrative sermons from week to week. Fans follow their teams across the world to be there when the team they love and worship is crowned champions of some kind, and managers and players are admired like saints and prophets. He concludes with what he calls a condemnable but undeniable fact that football has crossed into the territory of religion in Argentina, where anyone who so desires can visit the “Church of Maradona” and worship with the devoted followers of the “god,” Diego Maradona, the late soccer superstar who helped Argentina win the soccer World Cup in 1986.

Noting the similarities between football and religion, Juricic (2013) states that in religion petition (prayer) is made to gods, just as in football high expectations are placed on the players. Furthermore, when true believers are disappointed by their gods, and true fans disappointed by their players, the latter still continue to believe in the former. Also a believer feels connected with a god when praying in the same way a fan feels connected to his/her team when singing an anthem. In the same parallel manner, morality, punishment and hell enforced by God as preached by religion are synonymous with a referee with a red card sending sinners out of the kingdom (pitch) for breaking the rules of the game.

Football functions as a religion in that millions of followers every week enter the “churches” (stadia) across the world in the hope of experiencing glorious moments of soccer action that they will remember for the rest of their lives. Football entertainment, cum obsession, will no doubt endure for generations to come and will remain part of people’s collective consciousness alongside other religions that control so much of their world. Devotees continue to enjoy the spectacle soccer affords, and hope for the miracles that sometimes happen in the form of rallies, spectacular come-backs, and fantastic goals. In spite of the sins of the “religion”—like careless acts that lead to unnecessary penalties, own-goals, administrative incompetence of coaches, and the economic exploitation of the players—the magic of football is unabated.

For Juricic (2019) the “civil religion” proposed by Rousseau has beliefs, values, and practices that the adherents deem sacred and put complete faith into. In the sporting world, a similar practice is observed when many fans put their complete faith into their favorite

teams, treating each game as if it were a sacred ritual. Each team has a well known symbol or logo, and whether fans fully understand the meaning of the symbol or not, the sight of it provokes their inner passion and activates their emotions for the team. Block (2009) cites James Mathisen as comparing the symbols found in sports halls of fame to the remembrance of saints that have passed on in religion.

Sports is a very powerful religion which gives a sense of belonging, identity, and self-worth. The worship that is practiced in sports, especially football, is like no other; the feeling of sitting in a crowded stadium with other fellow “worshippers” gives an electrifying sensation. Football has many believers and followers who spend money and travel to their favorite stadia to see their “gods” perform first-hand. It usually incorporates a faith that is so strong that it leaves the fans of the losing teams weak and dejected. In some cases, distraught fans are known to behave irrationally, and in extreme cases, some commit suicide.

Soccer qualifies as a civil religion because of its ability to bring different people together and give them shared values, expectations and identity. This comes with an accompanying sense of group, regional, or national feelings of pride and patriotism for the winning side, and sadness and sorrow for the losers. More so, the celebrities in the form of star coaches, players, and clubs become status symbols as well as the “deities” and cult personnel that keep the religion going. These are comparable to ancestors, heroes, saints, and martyrs who both motivate and consume the adoration, worship, and praise generated by the teeming followers.

Xifra, cited in Lopez (2019), defines “civil religion” as a religion that demonstrates both the moral and spiritual values of a community or modern society involving myths, symbols and public rituals. In exploring the notion of football as a religion, he conducted studies that spanned five continents and came up with interesting findings. From the research, Argentina’s Diego Maradona transformed himself from a mere soccer star into a national symbol of worship. For the Italians, soccer is a product of religious intervention, and in India, the religion of soccer was used to reinforce British morals and ethics. Amongst the Tanzanians, reflecting the African experience, the casting of mystical spells practiced in traditional religion became essential for achievements to be made in soccer, while Mexicans incorporated the tenets of Catholicism into their viewing of soccer.

While soccer fandom may not be traditionally considered a religious movement, it can indeed share some similarities with new religious movements (NRMs). This is because soccer fans engage in rituals like chanting, singing, and performing specific gestures, which can be seen as sacred practices. Soccer fandom provides a sense of community and belonging, much like traditional religious groups. Fans share a common identity and bond over their love for the team. Soccer teams have rich histories, symbols, and myths surrounding their origins, successes, and failures. These narratives can take on a mythological quality, similar to those found in religious traditions. Soccer fans exhibit intense emotional investment in their teams, which can be comparable to the passion and devotion found in religious movements. Fans travel to stadiums, which can be seen as sacred spaces, to watch their teams play. These pilgrimages can be emotionally charged and provide a sense of connection to the team and fellow fans.

Soccer fandom does not typically involve spiritual or supernatural beliefs, which are core components of most religious movements. Instead, soccer is a secular activity, and fandom is primarily focused on entertainment, socialization, and community rather than spiritual growth or enlightenment. Soccer fandom is often fluid, with fans switching teams or allegiances over time. This flexibility is not typically characteristic of religious movements, which often require a deeper, more committed adherence. But it can be argued that soccer fandom can be seen as a form of “civil religion” or “secular ritual,” which provides a sense of community, identity, and shared experience, but without the spiritual or supernatural elements that define traditional religious movements.

### **Fundamentalism and the Growth of the Football “Religion”**

The fundamentalism that leads to fanaticism and its resultant extremities that obtain in religion also have parallels in soccer. Soccer exerts a huge impact on cultures around the world through its ability to function as a global religion. With something as powerful as soccer, the possibility of abuse is present, as passion for the game can have a better part of one’s mind and affect judgment. Kenney (2019) states that with something as powerful as soccer, the possibility of a negative consequence is always present, as passion for the game can dominate one’s mind and becloud

judgment. Citing Andres Escobar’s assassination after his inadvertent own-goal while playing for his country, Colombia in the 1994 World Cup, which resulted in Colombia’s elimination from the tournament, he posits that Escobar became a religious martyr whose death epitomizes the violence that can result from a passionate outbreak similar to the ones caused by fanatics in religion. Escobar’s gruesome murder for making a mistake in the field of play forever remains a sad symbol of the severity with which devout fans revere and worship soccer.

West (2016) asserts that in modern times, Karl Marx’s position that religion is the opium of the masses has ceased largely to be obtainable in the developed countries of the world. Organized “spiritual” religion with its belief in the supernatural used to serve the purpose of providing hope and salvation, and encouraging people to accept their lot in the world without disturbing the social order. But modern scientific advances have subjected long-held creeds and practices to scrutiny and doubt, rendering many religious beliefs untenable to post-modern minds. For them, the few remaining religious practices being undertaken are a mere formality. West further postulates that this does not mean that there is no longer a need for Marx’s “opium of the masses”. As the world is still unfair, and death is still inevitable, another powerful source of emotional support has crept into the void once occupied by Jesus and his disciples, which is football.

With devotion to football becoming extreme, the football flocks have large capacity stadia as their places of worship substituting for the once grand but now sparsely populated and deserted temples and cathedrals. Other areas of substitution are club chants and anthems (like the popular UEFA Champions League anthem) in place of religious hymns; soccer stars and distinguished coaches like Messi, Ronaldo and Jose Mourinho in place of revered saints; club logos, T-shirts and flags in the place of religious symbols and artifacts (like the Christian cross); team clashes like Chelsea versus Manchester City, or some other explosive derbies in place of theological and sectarian disputes in religion.

The hope that religion used to solely offer abounds in football, as fans can live and hope for the next game, the next season or tournament, hoping that their team might win some silverware and soccer glory the next time around. When an unexpected under-dog team wins a league or tournament, the pleasant shock and elation can make the team supporters believe they

have experienced heaven on earth, having realized their wildest dream. The fans might not believe in God, or may have distanced themselves from organized religion, but ultimately they find their new “gods” in their trail-blazing players and coaches. With this development, the number of church-goers and participants in other religious activities is now universally dwarfed by the number of people who regularly attend football matches and tournaments, and in many ways, the social functions of football bear a more than passing resemblance to the role formerly played by religion in the western world.

Waalkes (2017) has also explored the challenges soccer has posed to traditional religion in the modern world. For the majority of young people, and a good number of adults, the “Big Game” as soccer is often called, competes fiercely with religious responsibilities for the attention and time of the adherents regarding active participation. The amount of time spent on soccer compared to the commitment to religious and other activities is a problem which religious groups and communities cannot ignore. For young people especially, the sphere of soccer entertainment has been expanding at the expense of religious activities, and serving football as an idol to the detriment of the worship of God. Soccer schedules are more appealing liturgies than church services. For the younger generations, the names and the bio-statistics of top strikers in world football are far better known than the saints of any religion, and their exploits much more popular and widely discussed than matters pertaining to religion. This is in sharp contrast with religious topics that often divide people of diverse religious backgrounds, and which seem sectarian and irrelevant, engendering bias, and ending without finding areas of

common ground on belief and creeds. Waalkes concludes that “global football looks like a rival to the great religions, contributing to secularization, or more accurately, luring people to an alternative form of sacralization.”

Maller (2016) is of the opinion that the World Cup acts as a religious ceremony similar to the Christian Christmas, as over one billion people simultaneously watched the 2014 World Cup final in Brazil. Soccer’s incredible reach makes it the most prevalent global religion today. Juricic (2013) asserts that when the newly enthroned Pope Francis spoke at the World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 2013 and commented that “Jesus is more important than football,” it was not really an effective way to attract people to Christianity in a country as soccer-mad as Brazil. The Pope’s spirited attempt at highlighting Jesus in a Roman Catholic-dominated country points to a subtle, but real, clash between two different very strong religions in Brazilian society, where most people, though Catholic, are addicted to football. Sports, especially football, is clearly not only a physical activity but a strong social and emotional phenomenon that has tremendous influence on all spheres of human life—including politics, economics, and international relations. Hundley (2016) rightly asserts that the soccer World Cup that comes around every four years is soccer religion’s hero-making machine, and that it is akin to deification and canonization in religion. During the fiesta, new “gods”, saints and villains are made on a global scale and with wide acclaim, depending on the performances of individual players and managers.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In some places, the exclusion of women from football for religious reasons is a complex and multifaceted issue. Some theological traditions have historically interpreted religious texts in ways that justify the exclusion of women from certain activities, including sports like football. This theological perspective posits that men and women have different, complementary roles in society. Some proponents of complementarianism may argue that women's exclusion from football is necessary to maintain these distinct roles. This perspective further assumes that men and women have inherent, essential differences that determine their abilities and interests. Essentialist theology might be used to justify the exclusion of women from football based on perceived physical or emotional differences.

Some Christian theologians have interpreted I Corinthians 11:2-16 as prohibiting women from participating in activities that require physical exertion or competition, such as football. 1 Timothy 2:11-12 is another biblical passage that has been used to justify the exclusion of women from certain activities, including sports. Some Islamic theologians have also interpreted certain Quranic verses (e.g., Surah Al-Ahzab, 33:59) as prohibiting women from participating in activities that might lead to immodesty or exposure. However, despite historical exclusion, women's football leagues have emerged and gained popularity worldwide. FIFA has launched initiatives to promote women's football and increase participation and feminist theologians, activists, and advocates continue to challenge theological justifications for women's exclusion from football, promoting inclusive and equitable perspectives. So while some theological perspectives have historically justified exclusion, counter-theological perspectives and real-world initiatives are promoting inclusivity and equality.

## The Cases of Argentina and Brazil

The common characteristic of many religions is the belief in supernatural beings who possess special powers, are worthy of worship, and who have existential impact on human beings. As with Marx's "opium of the people," Juricic (2013) notes that football distracts people and dictates their way of life, influences their behaviour, and makes people to experience transcendental feelings in stadiums, in front of the television and elsewhere, especially in bars. As in religion, football does not really have specific gods or deities, but has a lot of heroes that are depended on and worshipped as "gods" by fans. In line with this, Kenney (2019) states that in some cultures, soccer has become so deeply rooted in society that certain players are regarded almost as deities. In Argentina, thousands worship Diego Maradona as a man of divinity shrouded in myth and supernatural traits, representing for them what it means to be a perfect individual, since the society deems the traits required to be an exceptional player as traits for a god-like man.

Juricic (2013) notes that Alejandro Veron founded the *Church of Maradona (Iglesia Maradoniana)* in 1998 in the Argentine city of Rosario. Members of the Church of Maradona believe Diego Maradona is the best player of all time, and they count the years since Maradona's birth in 1960. The church also has its own Ten Commandments. Stickings and Couzens (2020) note that at Maradona's death in 2020, he received a state funeral with his remains lying in-state at the official residence of the President of Argentina for the duration of the national mourning, while thousands flooded the streets of Buenos Aires to honour the footballer they worshipped as a demi-god. World media houses gave massive coverage to Maradona's death, with perhaps the most catchy one being the French sports magazine, *L'Equipe*, with a full page cover of Maradona and a rather heretical screamer of a headline, "God is dead!". Stickings and Couzens also note that a Spanish newspaper combined Maradona's number 10 shirt with the Spanish word for God—"D10S", and also included the number 10 in the Spanish word for goodbye—"AD10S", in honour of the dead footballer, a sort of "Good bye, God" psycho-religious contraption.

Similar to Maradona's deification is that of the late Brazilian super-star Pele, who died on December 29, 2022. Dubbed the "Eternal King of Soccer" by some football enthusiasts, Pele was the only player to have won three World Cups in history, for Brazil. His high

level of influence was such that the Brazilian president declared a three-day national mourning period for the FIFA "Player of the Century" award winner. Countries, teams, players, corporations and individuals sent in their tributes along with the out-pouring of eulogies and condolence messages from across the globe. Among the myriads of tributes, Michel Platini's comments that "To play like Pele is to play like God," and Romario's "He's like a God to us," stand out. Following the state funeral, Pele was buried on the ninth floor of a thirty-two story skyscraper cemetery in Santos, Brazil, according to his wish—a befitting resting place for a "deity" in football, passing on as a great world figure and as one of the "immortal gods" in the world of football.

Kuiper (1999), from the perspective of Christianity, posits that the modern craze for leisure and entertainment is having its effect on the worship services of many churches. When church members are viewed as consumers who want to be entertained and seek entertainment outside religious activities of the church, it may be because God and all that He stands for in religious activities has been presented to the hedonistic modern society as a consumer-friendly God. Part of what puts football at par with religion is that much of what characterizes today's Christian worship is also similarly driven by the underlying crave for entertainment. People want to have a jolly good time in their church or else they will leave the church to find a better one with better music, a funnier and more motivational preacher, bigger stage and more brilliant lighting effects. Soccer provides much more than all the thrills that are sought after in entertainment. It also offers the role-models that both the fans and their children can look up to and strive to pattern their lives after as an undeclared replacement for their erstwhile religious activities.

Kuiper (1999) concludes that the Christian end-time warning prophecy that men would become lovers of pleasure more than God has come to be, and laments that the love of pleasure has developed into pleasure-madness where the rightness or wrongness of any activity is determined by whether it results in pleasure or pain. Thus as he puts it, for lovers of football, the well-attended churches are the stadiums. Their "gods" are the players, and their offerings to these "gods" enable the players to have salaries of millions of dollars per year. Life without sports would be inconceivable to them and would not be worthwhile if they could not fanatically attach themselves to some

team and cheer their hearts out for their soccer heroes and idols.

### **Religion and Soccer: The African Experience**

In Africa which is a melting pot of traditional religion and other religions occasioned by colonialism, western missionary enterprise, and lately, globalization, football ranks high on the list of phenomena that have both wide acceptability and disruptive influences on society in modern times. In Africa, religion and football generate both cooperation and conflict depending on the context. Both share the unique ability of crossing boundaries and gluing people of different cultural and political groups together. In African culture, individualism is not a highly recognized value. Individuals have to take on family cum group and ethnic identity to belong to the larger society. Similarly, football is about a balance between teamwork and individual talent and creativity. Religion has a striking semblance to teamwork in sports in that it encourages serving fellow human beings with a sense of individual accountability to God the creator. In this light, Girma (2019) opines that religious leaders and ordinary believers in Africa do not need to feel threatened by the overriding popularity and influence of football on the people in their religion and society. Rather, Africans need to re-imagine success in sports not through the agency of witchcraft (see below) which promotes short-cut and trickery, but with the values of hard work, discipline, team spirit, and endurance that sports ethics emphasize and offer, and which accord with the moral virtues that are deeply engrained in the African worldview and culture. The World Cup and other major soccer tournaments attract a lot of attention and interest among the young and old in Africa. Girma refers to the effects of the 2018 World Cup in Russia on Africans with regard to their religion, seeing the devotion, excitement and euphoria that accompany such a fiesta as a challenge to the continent's religion. He states that religion and sports are supposed to serve different purposes. Religion is meant to provide people with spiritual well-being, while sports serve aesthetic needs and entertainment. Nevertheless, they share a common audience and cultural values such as the values of fairness, discipline and commitment, which can be used to address African challenges.

In spite of the similarities in shared values, many in the religious community view football in Africa with contempt and suspicion. This is because of the

concern that football in Africa has a tendency to incorporate and apply witchcraft. Witchcraft is viewed as a negative aspect of religion in the continent and elsewhere, but is used to gain success in football matches. It is widely believed that both individual players and whole teams often use supernatural powers known as “juju” to imbue players with spiritual powers for their games. It is also used for protection from the assumed spiritual powers of their rival teams, to influence the officials and possibly get a good result—victory over the opposing teams. While witchcraft and soccer fandom may seem like unrelated topics, they share commonalities in terms of rituals, superstitions, collective energy, and emotional investment. By exploring these parallels, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities and nuances of soccer fandom. Soccer fans often engage in pre-match rituals, such as wearing lucky jerseys, performing specific chants, or following traditional pre-game routines. These rituals can be seen as a form of sympathetic magic, where fans believe their actions can influence the outcome of the game. Fans may have superstitions about certain players, coaches, or teams, believing they bring good or bad luck. These superstitions can be compared to the concept of “hexing” or “cursing” in witchcraft, where individuals believe they can influence events through magical means. Soccer fandom often involves a strong sense of collective identity, where fans share a common purpose and passion. This collective energy can be compared to the concept of “group consciousness” in witchcraft, where individuals come together to amplify their magical intentions. Soccer stadiums can be seen as sacred spaces, where fans gather to participate in rituals and ceremonies. This concept is reminiscent of the idea of “sacred circles” in witchcraft, where individuals create a designated space for magical workings. Soccer fandom can be an intense emotional experience, with fans investing their hopes, fears, and passions into the game. This emotional release can be compared to the concept of “catharsis” in witchcraft, where individuals release pent-up emotions to achieve a state of balance and renewal. Fans often strongly identify with their team, which can lead to feelings of pride, joy, or disappointment. This identification can be seen as a form of magical identification, where individuals merge their energy with that of the team, influencing the outcome of the game. So, the next time you're cheering for your favorite team, remember that you're participating in a form of collective magic, where

your energy and emotions can influence the outcome of the game.

With the growing trend to incorporate magic in football, it is therefore not surprising that some religious leaders have issues with football in terms of the spiritual and other-worldly intervention that is sought to replace or compliment the hard work and discipline needed for soccer victory cum glory. This “spiritual” dimension of soccer in Africa, coupled with its demands for allegiance, prodigious expense of time, and excessive emotional devotion from followers, have made some religious leaders see football as a threat. With the foregoing, and the idolization of football stars, it is not surprising that some religious leaders and their devoted faithful resent the rising popularity and impact of soccer on the continent. This misgiving is also heightened by the over-hyping and disproportionate use of religious metaphors by sports commentators and analysts to advertise, propagate and elevate football in the media. It is worsened by the elevation of prominent footballers to enviable heights, like calling Lionel Messi “the Messiah”, and dubbing Cristiano Ronaldo a “god”.

However, in spite of the concerns of religion, soccer has become an important aspect of people’s lives in Africa and the rest of the developing world. Girma (2019) states that beyond entertaining people, soccer offers a means of relaxing emotional tensions and creates the much needed, albeit temporary, distraction from the realities of the numerous problems ordinary people encounter on a daily basis—aptly granting credibility to Karl Marx’s “opiate of the masses” theory. Soccer followership is also a time-tested means of whipping up an over-riding sense of national pride and undying patriotism, which politicians can and do harness to great advantage. The ever-rising influence of football in Africa is also due to the fact that it is one of the ways to solve the nagging unemployment problems and improve the finances of individual players, especially those who are fortunate enough to play as professionals in the established leagues of the western world. In fact, football has become one of the few means of producing African millionaires, such as George Weah, Roger Miller, Jay Jay Okocha, Didier Drogba, Mohammed Salah, Victor Osimhen, and so on, who inspire the African youth to pursue success and greatness. These and many other soccer super-stars help to secure Africa’s quota of worship-able “gods” in the new world religion of football. Soccer as a big-time, money-spinning venture clearly produces a lot of inspiring role-models

for young people in the developing economies of Africa just as saints and martyrs in religion inspire zeal, devotion and holiness.

Girma (2019) also rightly notes that in many African countries football provides a safe environment for some of the most lively and hot discussions among its teeming enthusiasts, and is one of the few social spaces in which people practice freedom of speech without fear of retribution. Fans can freely criticize and even curse coaches and players alike whom they deem to be under-performing. Every fan can choose to become a self-made analyst, wading into coaching and playing patterns, recommending coaches to be sacked and players to be sold, predicting the outcome of matches, and analyzing, rightly or wrongly, the performance of individual players and the officiating of the matches without worrying about getting harassed or being arrested for their views. All this is very unlike discussions in the political sphere and in other spheres in the developing African continent, which is fraught with totalitarian regimes that stifle freedom of speech and expression.

### **The Impact of Football in Nigeria**

Football is a culture that has been deeply rooted in the Nigerian culture for many years, pre-dating independence from Great Britain. According to Wiebe (2018), football was first introduced to Nigeria by the British at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the first recorded football match in the country being held in 1904. By 1950, it had become the national game of the country and has ever continued to grow rapidly, joining the Federation of International Football Associations (FIFA) in 1960, the year of independence from Britain. Many Nigerians derive entertainment and a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment from being part of its organization. Interest in football has continued to sky-rocket among all age-groups in Nigeria and the country can be rated among countries with the largest fan base in the African continent. The country has regional teams that contest in the National League, and the ‘Super Eagles’, the national team, regularly competes for international titles and has made its mark in global sports competitions as one of the best soccer teams in Africa. As the most popular sport in Nigeria, football gives a sense of national pride to the citizens and is a veritable source of making local, regional and international heroes.

In recent years, football’s popularity has continued to skyrocket, making Nigeria one of the largest sports

betting markets in the world. Smith (2023) states that with the advances in communication technology, online gambling and betting services have become more accessible and affordable, as betting apps have been made available to millions of people worldwide. Thus, betting has made way for people to increasingly enjoy their football experience as well as combine their passion for soccer with pursuit of financial gain through the opportunities afforded by soccer betting. Peredictz.ng identifies 29 betting sites for sports addicts in Nigeria. With gamblers or “betters” in Nigeria having so many betting companies to choose from, the time and resources devoted to soccer and its affiliated acts subtract from devotion to religion and other concerns in the Nigerian society. The craving for sports betting among the youth in Nigeria, who may have the aim of getting quick wealth, is akin to the popular prosperity gospel and the “sowing and reaping” teaching that is the order of the day especially in the Christian religion in Nigeria.

Football detracts from religious activities on the week-ends, such as the Friday prayers of Muslims and the Sunday worship services of Christians. Like these religious gatherings, football provides the rituals of week-end socialization and leisure in Nigeria for the teeming masses truly committed to the sport. If there is a clash of schedules between soccer matches and days of worship and other religious gatherings, those who are growing less devout in their religious obligations choose to stay home on Sundays to watch the match of the day. Dafe (2017) postulates that football offers its adherents the annual calendar of fast and feast to shape their lives just like the church year used to do. Football has inherited all the tribalism of religion, giving followers something to belong to, and bringing nations and communities together and uniting them against the enemy, whether in physical violence or just chant.

Commenting on the ritual effects of football in Nigeria, Chukwunke (2024) opines that after a major victory/trophy, a football team can transcend into the realm of divinity to become a way to experience oneness of spirit and unity of faith in a country with a lot of diversity. Both players and fans can experience days of fasting and prayers, inviting prophets, imams, and sometimes, traditional priests to invoke the god of soccer in their favour. Chukwunke rightly asserts that football has always challenged the devotion and inclination of the adherents of the three major religions in Nigeria—Christianity, Islam and Traditional Religion—stating that a greater percentage of young

people in the country would rather watch a Premier League or UEFA Championship League game on cable television than go to a religious meeting. Such young people spend more time watching and reading football materials than their Bible or Koran, and have more in-depth knowledge of football than their religious scripture.

Most followers of soccer in Nigeria are too sophisticated for the quality that the Nigerian domestic league has to offer, and would rather follow top leagues in Europe in their homes or from the viewing centres scattered across the country, like the churches and mosques. These viewing centres serve the soccer adherents like the religious places of worship serve their congregations during the mid-week and the week-end. Chukwunke concludes that the churches and mosques have been trying to get the people they are losing to soccer back from what they call “idol worship” by forming football outreaches or evangelism to engage the youth. Other religious leaders have outrightly declared the new football “religion” as the devil’s tool to lure people away from God.

It has been the tradition in most parts of eastern Nigeria for soccer fiestas to be part of the Christian celebration of Christmas, among other social gatherings that are organized during the Christmas /New Year celebrations. Nnadi (2015) notes that when many Igbo people in the diaspora return to their kith and kin at the end of each year to celebrate Christmas and subsequently welcome the in-coming year, inter-community and inter-branch soccer fiestas have, since the late 1970s, formed a salient part of the festivities. Football teams from different urban areas (branches) in which the sons and daughters of a given community live, like Lagos, Abuja, etc. compete for laurels in the selected community school fields with throngs of fans cheering their teams. Most of the players make it a point of duty to return in good time to practice their team strategy in order to perform well. Many people who purposefully come home to celebrate a religious festival, Christmas, and to subsequently welcome a new year and pray for its divine blessings, hardly enter the churches even for the main Christmas Day service on December 25. As most school fields are located near churches (due to the close connection between the churches and schools from the church missionary enterprise in eastern Nigeria), one can easily see groups of football players on such fields preparing for the community football competitions even while the faithful are holding their Christmas services.

One of the researchers who is a priest of the Anglican Church has had the daunting task of having to plead and parley with a group of players and their fans whose spontaneous and noisy celebration of mere practice goals actually disturbed his church's Christmas morning service. Apparently the soccer fiestas and other social aspects of the celebrations are more important for a majority of people than religious obligations during such festive mass-returns. The fact that football competitions are more heavily attended than church services, evangelism crusades, and other religious gatherings lends credence to the fact that soccer has become a parallel religion to people in eastern Nigeria where the vast majority are known to be Christians, at least at the nominal level.

The other researcher recalls a similar experience during the 2002 soccer World Cup hosted by Japan and Korea. Because of the difference in international time zones, Nigeria's group stage match with Argentina scheduled on June 2, 2002 happened on a Sunday morning. Across Nigeria, both in the rural and urban areas, there were many empty pews during that morning's service because of people's preference to watch the game live on television. Some smart pastors who had anticipated such an outcome, and perhaps who love football too, adjusted their time of service to allow soccer-loving members of their congregations to watch the encounter (which the Super Eagles eventually lost by a lone goal). Others, as reported in some Nigerian tabloids, brought television sets into their churches to concurrently "pray" for the Super Eagles while watching the match, after which they continued with their worship sessions. One can readily see how the over-riding compulsion to watch a live soccer "ritual" being conducted half a world away disrupted the traditionally established weekly rituals of the Christian service in another part of the globe. This is a strong pointer to the fact that Christianity has been compelled to either make some compromise with football, or risk its churches having empty pews, or outrightly lose its adherents to the soccer religion.

It is also well known that against a background of the erratic power supply in the country, many people in Nigeria buy petrol or diesel to power their generators and stay awake late into the nights to watch live football matches during major soccer tournaments hosted in far-away time zones. Whereas such soccer devotees are keen on spending time and other resources to enjoy football and follow their team's progress, many among them are obviously not either ready or willing to participate in and spend a similar

quantity and quality of time in night prayer vigils and other related religious activities to which they may be obligated in their different religions.

One of the natural reactions of religious institutions, especially Christian ones, to the waves of people whose attention has been largely diverted from religious activities to football has been to incorporate aspects of football activities in the extra-liturgical packages they offer to their members. This includes the normal football matches that involve older people that are organized to mark church anniversaries and spice up celebrations within the churches. In Nigeria, as in other countries across the world, churches are founding football teams for their members in a sort of "if you can't beat them, join them" approach to accommodating the unconquerable interest of their members in soccer. Major churches in Nigeria organize football leagues and tournaments for youth groups in their catchment areas to placate their interest in soccer and still keep them as active church members. In this regard, the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Church was the first church to establish a soccer team (MFM FC) that made its way into the competitive Nigerian Professional League in 2015, with other churches following suit. Subsequently, the COD United FC, another Nigerian professional football club based in Lagos was established by the COD Parish of the Redeemed Christian Church of God. Wikipedia states that the COD United FC runs seven football teams for various age-groups, ranging from Under-10 to Under-21 teams, including a female club known as the COD United Amazons FC.

With this growing trend, Eludini (2014) notes that what he calls "the first Church World Cup" soccer tournament was organized for church-based teams from Colombia, Egypt, Uzbekistan, India, Brazil, Ghana, Nigeria and Portugal. The competition was held in India in honour of Francis Xavier, the late Christian missionary, and was won by Nigeria's Mountain of Fire and Miracles Football Team (MFM FC) in December 2014, after thrashing the United Church of Colombia team 7 - 0 in the final match to lift the trophy.

### ***Football Evangelism in Nigeria***

A good number of discerning church leaders in Nigeria are taking the interest of the youth in football into consideration and factoring this into their schedules accordingly. Some have viewing centres on church premises to attract soccer lovers to their

churches, while others especially in the urban areas, encourage supporters of various clubs (fan clubs) to identify as groups in the churches and come into the church service with their team flags, T-shirts/jerseys and other club paraphernalia for their own group harvests during the church harvest season. It is like learning to compulsorily adjust and accommodate a new and influential parallel religion, the neglect of which would be to the detriment of the growth of the existing one.

On this premise, a relatively new term “football cum soccer evangelism” has come into usage in the Nigerian churches, which is the practice of using football games as one of the platforms to share the gospel and promote Christian values. This involves using the game of football to reach out to and attract the younger age-group into the churches through inter-parish and inter-group soccer tournaments. Such football evangelism is fully funded by the churches, and intends to meaningfully engage the youth in their favourite pastime while still retaining their interest and participation in church activities. This is a well-calculated attempt to push back on the vast territorial gains being made by the unseen “god of soccer” on the religious cum social space of our modern society, with the aim of checkmating the seemingly irrepressible rampages and quest for conquest of more territory by football.

## Conclusion

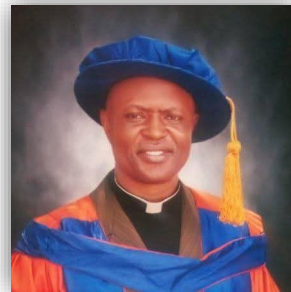
This paper has considered the similarities between football and religion as they obtain in the modern world, stating its evolving influence as a new religion in society. The paper has looked into how soccer has developed into a sport of mass-engagement and entertainment as well as a catalyst for patriotism, national identity, and pride. Through the analysis presented, we have seen how strong and unrelenting the influence of football has become across the globe, and especially in Nigeria, the immediate focus of study. We have also noted the causes of this influence on the population of both the young and old people in the developed and the developing countries of the world. The acceptance of football as the so-called “king of sports” is taking its toll on the time and resources formerly devoted to religious engagements, with the commitment it affords surpassing that of religious devotion and fervor. This overwhelming influence has pushed a good number of Christian leaders in Nigeria and elsewhere to re-strategize and accommodate

soccer or risk a steady and uncontrollable decline of their member’s interest in Christian religious engagements in favour of football. Further research is needed to track, assess and understand the continuing growth and influence of football and its related activities across the world, or in particular regions of our continents. This is with the aim of further harnessing its potential for religious, social, political and economic development.

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