

## Evolution and the Olympics

**BARRY R. HARKER**

### ABSTRACT

*This paper seeks to explain the endless controversy and conflict associated with the modern Olympic Games. It begins by drawing attention to the implicit evolutionism of ancient Greek religion which attained its highest expression in the ancient Olympic Games. The paper then notes how the Jews and early Christians rejected ancient Greek athleticism. It is further noted that the fusion of Muscular Christianity and Social Darwinism in the nineteenth century, which played a crucial role in the development of the modern Olympic Games, is the source of the conflict and moral ambiguity which besets modern Olympism. The paper concludes by highlighting the irreconcilable differences between the religions of Christianity and Olympism.*

---

### INTRODUCTION

The modern Olympic Games are almost universally accepted as a great international festival of peace, sportsmanship and friendly competition. Yet, the Games are riddled with conflict, cheating and obsessive competitiveness. Defenders of the Olympics usually attribute these ongoing problems to the corruption of the Olympic ideal by external forces. In this article, I reject this defence and outline an alternative explanation for the endless controversy associated with the modern Olympic Games, based upon the inextricable association of the Olympic Games, ancient and modern, with evolutionism.

### THE EVOLUTIONARY ORIGINS OF ANCIENT OLYMPISM

Many today believe that evolutionary theory is a modern scientific invention. Yet, the ancient Greeks, for example, believed that the universe emerged from primeval chaos to bring forth its gods.<sup>1</sup> The thinking of the poet Hesiod was influential in relation to the origin of the world. Hesiod believed that the Earth was initially a shapeless mass which brought forth the spirit of love, called Eros or Cupid, and then the broad-chested Earth or Gaea. These gods were followed by other gods who, by their various unions, guided the development of the physical characteristics of the world

and the emergence of life.<sup>2</sup> In an older and apparently more obscure notion, Homer ascribed the origin of the world to the god Okeanos, the ocean.<sup>3</sup>

The love goddess Aphrodite is supposed to have been born from the sea. Taylor asks whether the Greeks were hinting in this myth that mankind was born from the sea as in the textbook explanations given today.<sup>4</sup> What is clear, however, is that, when stripped of their mythic elements, all these notions are remarkably similar to modern evolutionary explanations for the origins of the universe, the world and life. They assume that there was no guiding intelligence in the appearance of matter and life.

Perhaps this is an explanation for the anthropomorphism of Greek religion. The Greeks believed that their gods were quarrelsome, capricious and fiercely competitive, and that it was the duty of humans to emulate them. Thus, the Greek gods were idealised humanity.<sup>5</sup> The pervasiveness of competition in ancient Greece can certainly be explained by this belief in the evolutionary origins of the cosmos and the consequent need for individuals to defend their own interests in a capricious world. That is consistent with the evidence that the Greeks believed that the effort expended in the Olympic Games was transferred to the powers of growth and fertility,<sup>6</sup> powers so essential to their temporal prosperity.

The ancient Olympic Games were the highest expression of Greek religion. The Games were held at

**Evolution and the Olympics — Marker**

Olympia in honour of the god Zeus, the supreme god of ancient Greek mythology, and included sacrifices and religious rituals. The Altis at Olympia, a grove of trees at the foot of Mount Kronos, was the most sacred place for the worship of Zeus in Greece. Mount Kronos is named after the supposed father of Zeus. Within the Altis, before the worship of Zeus had become established, fertility rites to the Earth goddess, Ge, were practised.<sup>7</sup>

The association of the ancient Olympic Games with Greek religion is not surprising given that, historically, competitive sports originated in religious festivals and celebrations. In primitive tribes and the earliest literate societies, competitive sports are inseparably associated with religion.<sup>8</sup> Sports mostly originated as fertility magic,<sup>9</sup> although another important element in the origin of sports is mimetic magic, in which the dead are often associated with powers of growth. Just as blood shed by sacrifice was thought to refresh the dead for their labours, the effort expended in sport was thought to be transferred to the powers of growth and fertility.<sup>10</sup> The fact that the Olympic Games were held at the second or third full moon after the summer solstice indicates a possible association with mimetic magic.<sup>11</sup>

**JUDEO-CHRISTIANITY AND HELLENISM**

The Greek attitude to sports is in sharp contrast with that of the Jews who considered the Greek games idolatrous. When the Seleucids attempted to forcibly Hellenise the Jews between 175 and 165 BC, Greek athleticism was one of their main cultural weapons. When Antiochus IV 'Epiphanes' instituted a program of compulsory Hellenisation, looted the Jewish temple in Jerusalem and placed a statue of the Olympian Zeus in it, the devout Jews rose in revolt.

Later, the early Christian church played a key role in the downfall of the ancient Olympic Games. The early Christians objected to the Olympic Games on moral grounds.<sup>12</sup> The final Olympic Games of antiquity were held in AD 393. One year later, Theodosius I, a Christian emperor, banned the reckoning of time in Olympiads (four-year intervals) and all pagan festivals. Within two centuries, barbarian invasions, earthquakes and floods obliterated the site of the games at Olympia.

The irreconcilable world-views at the basis of this clash about sports have been enshrined in Western civilisation. This is why ancient Greece has always been a rallying point for opposition to Biblical Christianity in the Western world. Percy Bysshe Shelley, who was expelled from Oxford for writing and circulating a pamphlet entitled 'The Necessity of Atheism', wrote in 1822, '*We are all Greeks, our laws, our literature, our religion, our arts, have their roots in Greece.*'<sup>13</sup>

Shelley, one of the greatest of the Romantic poets, was not exactly an expert in religion, as Knox points out.<sup>14</sup> Shelley clearly exaggerated the influence of Neo-Platonic philosophy upon Christianity and downplayed the deeper

and wider roots of Christianity in Hebrew Palestine.<sup>15</sup> However, Shelley does represent those moderns who respond to the appeal of ancient Greece and who continue to draw inspiration from it. Heinrich Heine was more accurate when he indicated that we are religiously Jews or Greeks.<sup>16</sup> Matthew Arnold drew a similar conclusion to Heine when he indicated that Hellenism and Hebraism are the two points between which '*the human spirit must forever oscillate*'<sup>1</sup>

**MUSCULAR CHRISTIANITY, SOCIAL DARWINISM AND THE REVIVAL OF OLYMPISM**

The antipathy between these two great influences in Western civilisation explains why interest in sports revived whenever there was a revival of interest in ancient Greece. It was during one such revival in Britain in the middle of the nineteenth century that sports finally achieved the legitimacy necessary for widespread acceptance in the Western world. Sports attained this legitimacy through the influence of the Muscular Christianity movement which promoted a thinly Christianised version of the cult of manliness which emerged from the classical revival. Muscular Christianity provided a rationale for the ancient Greek infatuation with winning under the guise of Christianity morality.

Muscular Christianity achieved its widespread popularity through the advocacy of sports in the essays and novels of influential churchmen in Britain, particularly Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes. Hughes' novel **Tom Brown's Schooldays**, published in 1857, the year in which the phrase Muscular Christianity was coined in a review of one of Charles Kingsley's novels, was enormously influential in popularising Muscular Christianity and later played a crucial role in the rise of the modern Olympic Games.

The classical revival also helped to create conducive conditions for the acceptance of Darwin's theory of evolution. Importantly, Charles Kingsley became the first clerical Darwinist in 1859. Not surprisingly, the ideals of Muscular Christianity soon fused with those of the movement known as Social Darwinism, which applies evolutionary biological theory and principles to the economic, political and social realms, thereby giving tremendous impetus to the notion that unremitting competition is socially progressive.<sup>18</sup>

The fusion of Muscular Christianity and Social Darwinism occurred initially in the British Public Schools between 1860 and 1880, during which time games were made compulsory at all leading public schools. The result of this fusion has been described as circumscribed Social Darwinism — an odd blend of ruthlessness, honour, politeness and self-control which involves crushing opponents with a controlled, good-humoured smile.<sup>19</sup> It also resulted in what Mangan describes as the secular trinity of the British Public Schools in late Victorian and Edwardian

England: athleticism, imperialism and militarism.<sup>20</sup> The anti-intellectualism, anti-industrialism and anti-commercialism of the public schools of this period can be traced to the rise of the secular trinity.<sup>21</sup>

Muscular Christianity legitimised sports by introducing the notion that 'friendly competition' has character building and civilising powers. In the process, Muscular Christianity aligned itself with some strange forces. Historian Peter Gay identifies Social Darwinism and the cult of manliness as two of the three major forces which cultivated hatred in the nineteenth century.<sup>22</sup>

Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the French founder of the modern Olympic Games, drew much of his inspiration from the ancient Olympic Games and **Tom Brown's Schooldays**. In establishing the modern Olympic Games, Coubertin fused the Muscular Christian values of sportsmanship and friendly competition with evolutionary humanism. In attempting to fuse two incompatible modes of life and thought, Coubertin ensured that the modern Olympic movement would be full of contradiction and moral ambiguity. In fact, contradiction and ambiguity are built into the very fabric of modern Olympism. For example, Coubertin's emphasis on participation rather than winning is contradicted by the Darwinian Olympic motto: '*Citius, Altius, Fortius*' (Faster, Higher, Stronger).

In addition to playing a major role in creating the conditions which led to the establishment of the modern Olympic Games, Darwinised Muscular Christianity also created the widespread conditions which allowed the modern Olympic Games to achieve almost universal acceptance within a few short years of the first modern Olympic Games in Athens in 1896. Muscular Christianity spread rapidly throughout the British Empire in the late Victorian era when British influence in the world was at its peak. A co-extensive Muscular Christianity movement in the United States of America also provided Coubertin with a powerful Anglo-American support base for the promotion of the modern Olympic Games.

### THE RELIGION OF OLYMPISM

The link between ancient and modern Olympism is clearly seen in the religious nature of the modern Olympics. In a radio address in 1935, Coubertin stated that,

*'The ancient as well as the modern Olympic Games have one most important feature in common: they are a religion.'*<sup>23</sup>

Coubertin also suggested that he had connected the modern Olympic Games with religious feelings from the very beginning.<sup>24</sup> It was Coubertin's intention that the religious idea of sport be encapsulated in the notion of the *religio athletae* or religion of the athlete. Coubertin saw the Olympic Games as the **holy mass** of the concept *religio athletae*.<sup>25</sup>

Earlier, Coubertin had written that for him sports were: '*a religion with church, dogmas, and ritual. . . but most of*

*all with religious feelings.*<sup>26</sup> Avery Brundage, President of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) from 1952 to 1972, echoed these sentiments when he declared to his IOC colleagues that Olympism was:

*'a religion with universal appeal which incorporates all the basic values of other religions, (sic) a modern, exciting, virile, dynamic religion.'*<sup>27</sup>

Whatever religion modern Olympism represents, it is not a Christian religion. Olympism requires its adherents to embrace a spirit of supremacy which is completely at odds with Christianity. The apostle Paul advises the Philippians:

*'If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies, Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, or one mind. Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus' (Philippians 2:1-5 KJV).*

Romans 12:10 is a similar injunction:

*'Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love: in honour giving preference to one another'*

These injunctions clearly rule out such single-minded devotion to sports and the win-at-all-costs attitude.

The Scriptural and ethical barriers to involvement in such a way in competitive sports were understood within apostolic Christianity. That these barriers do not seem to be widely understood today by Christians indicates the need for a re-examination of the use of sports as socialising agencies within Christian families, churches and educational institutions. The need for re-examination of sports as worthwhile activities is particularly urgent within the creationist community because of the demonstrated links between evolutionism and ancient and modern Olympism.

We should not be surprised that the modern Olympic Games are suffused with religious feelings, as they are modelled after the games which gave the highest expression to ancient Greek religion. Neither should we be surprised at the obsessive competitiveness which characterises the ancient and modern Olympic Games, because both traditions rest heavily upon an evolutionary understanding of origins and the consequent importance of struggle and achievement. The history of the ancient and the modern Olympic Games is further evidence for the view that modern evolutionism is not some great scientific achievement, but merely the revival of an alternative religious tradition with a long-standing antipathy to Christianity.

Thus, the obsessive competitiveness which characterises ancient and modern Olympism arises not from the corrupting influence of external forces, but from within Olympism itself. The desire to obtain the symbolic power of athletic victory is at the very heart of motivation to compete in sports. Participation for its own sake, peace

and friendly competition are modern accretions to ancient Olympism. These values do not represent the central impulse in sports. Neither do they have any real cultural power. This impotence is highlighted by the contemporary importance attached to winning in the modern Olympics.

### REFERENCES

1. Hale, W. D. (ed), 1984. **The Horizon Book of Ancient Greece**, Bonanza Books, New York, p. 48.
2. Murray, A. S., 1988. **Who's Who in Mythology: Classic Guide to the Ancient World**, second edition, Bracken Books, London, p. 22.
3. Murray, Ref. 2, pp. 22-23.
4. Taylor, I. T., 1984. **In the Minds of Men: Darwin and the New World Order**, TFE Publishing, Toronto, p. 291.
5. Bennett, B. L. and van Dalen, D. B., 1971. **A World History of Physical Education**, second edition, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, p. 35.
6. McIntosh, P. C., 1963. **Sport in Society**, C. A. Watts, London, pp. 2-3.
7. Swaddling, J., 1992. **The Ancient Olympic Games**, British Museum Press, London, p. 7.
8. Kraus, R., 1971. **Recreation and Leisure in Modern Society**, Prentice-hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, pp. 132-134.
9. Brasch, R., 1971. **How Did Sports Begin?**, Longman, Sydney, pp. 1-2.
10. McIntosh, Ref. 6, p. 3.
11. McIntosh, Ref. 6, p. 2.
12. Kraus, Ref. 8, p. 135.
13. Shelley, quoted in:  
Knox, B., 1993. **The Oldest Dead White European Males and Other Reflections on the Classics**, W. W. Norton, New York, pp. 26-27.
14. Knox, Ref. 13, p. 27.
15. Knox, Ref. 13, p. 27.
16. Cited in:  
Jenkyns, R., 1980. **The Victorians and Ancient Greece**, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, p. 69.
17. Arnold, quoted in:  
Jenkyns, Ref. 16, p. 68.
18. For an extended treatment of the origins of Muscular Christianity and its fusion with Social Darwinism to create conducive conditions for the revival of Olympism, see:  
Harker, B. R., 1996. **Strange Fire: Christianity and the Rise of Modern Olympism**, Hartland Publications, Rapidan, Virginia.
19. Mangan, J. A., 1982. Philathlete extraordinary: a portrait of the Victorian moralist Edward Bowen. **Journal of Sport History**, 9(3):34.
20. Mangan, J. A., 1975. Play up and play the game: Victorian and Edwardian public school vocabularies of motive. **British Journal of Educational Studies**, 23(3):324.
21. Mangan, Ref. 20, p. 324.
22. Gay, P., 1995. **The Cultivation of Hatred**, Fontana Press, London, pp. 35-36.
23. Quoted in:  
Krüger, A., 1993. The origins of Pierre de Coubertin's *religio athletae*. **Olympika: The International Journal of Olympic Studies**, 2:91.
24. Krüger, Ref. 23, p. 91.
25. Krüger, Ref. 23, p. 95.
26. Krüger, Ref. 23, p. 91.
27. Krüger, Ref. 23, p. 92.

---

**Barry R. Harker** has a Diploma in Physical Education and a Bachelor of Human Movement Studies from the University of Queensland, a M.Ed, from the University of New England, and a Ph.D. in philosophy of education from James Cook University of North Queensland. Dr Harker resides in Hervey Bay, Queensland, Australia, and operates a management and education consultancy in conjunction with his wife, Cecily.

### QUOTABLE QUOTE: What is Evolution?

*'From first to last it is a dish of rank materialism cleverly cooked up . . . And why is this done? For no other reason, I am sure, except to make us independent of a Creator*

Adam Sedgwick, Woodwardian Professor of Geology at Cambridge University, in his 1861 writings after reading Darwin's **The Origin of Species**, quoted from Clark, Ronald, 1984. **The Survival of Charles Darwin**, Random House, New York, NY, p. 139.