

Review of Annie Blazer, *Playing for God. Evangelical Women and the Unintended Consequences of Sports Ministry* (North American Religion Series), New York: New York University Press 2015, xii + 233 pp., ISBN 978-1-4798-1813-6

BY KATHRINE VAN DEN BOGERT, CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY, UTRECHT UNIVERSITY, THE NETHERLANDS

Sports ministry has become a growing, well-known and significant phenomenon in the United States. It started mainly with the promotion of evangelical Christianity by sports celebrities, yet nowadays it has shifted towards a great set of embodied practices for evangelical women and men in all kinds of sports, with trainings, competitions and summer camps. *Playing for God* is an ethnographic account that discusses this shift and the experiences of evangelical women in the sports ministry, focussing explicitly on the relationships between sport, evangelicalism, the body, gender and sexuality. The author, Annie Blazer, is assistant professor of religious studies at the College of William and Mary in Virginia, but she also identifies as anthropologist. In her fieldwork, conducted between 2006 and 2008, she studied different evangelical sports ministry organizations and teams in the USA: summer camps from Athletes in Action (AIA) and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA), an AIA women's basketball team and a women's Christian soccer team.

The main argument of *Playing for God* is that evangelical women's engagement with sport provides the opportunity to subtly rethink and reframe evangelical orthodoxy, especially on issues of gender, sexuality and heteronormativity. This is what Blazer defines as the unintended consequences of the sports ministry project, as sports ministry was actually embraced for reinforcing evangelical orthodoxy. The book is structured in two parts: part 1 on knowledge and part 2 on effects.

Part 1 discusses how religious knowledge is affirmed and strengthened through athletes' embodied experiences in sport. Witnessing – expressing one's salvation and belief in Christ – has always been an important aspect of Evangelical Christianity, yet in sports ministry it is mainly a 'witnessing without words' (p. 43) that is practiced, as Chapter 1 shows. Athletes witness not through narratives but through their deeds, behaviors and bodies on the field: through

good sportsmanship, compassion and fair play. However, this does not always correspond with the goal of winning in sport, which provides a moral dilemma for Christian athletes who combine witnessing and sport. Chapter 2 focuses on a sports theological discussion of embodied athletic experiences and pleasures, including pain, as intimate connections with God. This chapter highlights playing sport as an individual and private religious experience, regardless of the outcome of the competition. Chapter 3 continues with athletic embodied sensations (like pain, injury, stubbornness, soreness, fatigue and mastery) as religious experiences and as significant for spiritual warfare, steering away from the devil, and Christlikeness – God’s approval and love. The individual sensuous body as prime access to religious knowledge and experience is very much connected with the actual playing, thus in that way sports ministry is unintentionally reinforcing hierarchies in sport by ‘privileging athletes who get more playing time’, Blazer (p. 97) argues.

Part 2 contains ethnographic accounts of women’s experiences of gender and sexuality in the sports ministry. It discusses gender difference and segregation as organizing principle in both sport and evangelical Christianity, the latter prioritizing heterosexual marriage and motherhood. This part shows the tension between these evangelical ideals of women’s bodies and the sportive demands of their bodies; and argues that participating in sports ministry has given female athletes the opportunity to reflect on, negotiate and modify evangelical ideals of femininity, sexuality and marriage. In Chapter 4 Blazer shows how femininity, religious identity and heteronormativity are related to each other in the sports ministry. Because sport usually is associated with masculinity, many female athletes manage their bodies and appearances in a way that secures their femininity. However, Blazer also argues that because heterosexuality is assumed in evangelical contexts, female athletes can relax the cultural pressure of femininity a bit, which is more difficult in secular sport. They redefine femininity as including strength, power, leadership and action, normally attributed to masculinity. In Chapter 5 Blazer continues analyzing the heterosexual norm in the sports ministry. Some athletes keep their lesbian desires secret and/or aspire a straight lifestyle, for example through heterosexual marriage. However, by being an athlete, sometimes also playing in secular sports contexts, some Evangelical women were able to reflect on and resist the heterosexual norm, because of their sportive encounters with other lesbians. Marriage is the subject of the last chapter, which argues that female Christian athletes can negotiate conservative gender roles and male dominance in marriage because of their experiences and skills in the sports ministry, like leadership and strength.

Concluding, the intimate knowledge that is produced through playing sport allows female Christian athletes to reflect on and modify orthodoxy by redefining femininities, increasingly accepting lesbianism, and negotiating marriage expectations. This in turn has increased religious self-reflexivity and has provided tools for reevaluating religious practice, prioritizing the body and embodied religious experience. Negotiating orthodoxy is thus the unintended consequence of the engagement of religion with popular culture like sport. While traditionally American evangelicalism promotes polarization, Blazer argues, that women in the sports ministry rather practice pluralism regarding ideas on gender, sexuality, bodies and marriage.

A focus on sport provides a highly innovative way of studying contemporary evangelical religion and culture in the US. Contrary to most other volumes on

sport and religion this book puts the body, gender and sexuality at the center, which makes it a unique and crucial contribution to the study of religion and sport in society. The book highlights interesting parallels between evangelical Christianity and sport when it comes to gender and sexuality. Playing sport endorses gender ideologies of evangelical Christianity: a strong focus on gender difference, male dominance and gender segregation. At the same time, Blazer shows how through an increased women's participation in the sports ministry, male dominance, gender norms and heteronormativity are challenged in both sport and evangelical orthodoxy. A focus on the body in sport as source for and realization of religious knowledge is providing new insights into the intersections of religion, gender and sexuality, and how they are mediated and lived in popular culture.

However, some aspects are a bit underexposed in the analyses. There are great differences in the ways how bodies and gender norms work and play in different sports, which Blazer does not reflect on. For example, soccer in the USA is considered a more 'feminine' sport than basketball. Also, Blazer treats sport as quite isolated from other cultural and embodied practices in evangelical Christianity like music and dance, or from broader reforms in its orthodoxy concerning gender and sexuality. What sports' relation and unique contribution is to these reforms and popular cultural practices therefore is not entirely clear. Similarly, the way how societal inequalities and power structures like race, ethnicity, education or class are reproduced or challenged in sport and evangelical Christianity, and how they feed into the embodied knowledges produced, are not being discussed. Both evangelical Christianity and sport in the US are not only gendered and sexualized but also highly racialized, classed and related to educational possibilities.

Some of the arguments in part two I do not find entirely convincing. Blazer claims to study gender and sexuality in the sports ministry, yet frames her arguments in a way that prioritizes a gender perspective on sexuality: she mainly discusses lesbian and heterosexual identities in terms of performing femininity and masculinity. This is what Gayle Rubin warns against in her article *Thinking Sex* (1984): sexuality being subsumed under femininity and masculinity or the oppression of women. Rather, Rubin argues for a clear analytical separation of the concepts; for sexuality is indeed related to gender, but cannot be solely explained by a theory of gender.

Despite these shortcomings, *Playing for God* is a unique and interdisciplinary contribution that combines insights from a diversity of academic fields, notably religious studies, gender and 6 studies, cultural studies and American studies. I therefore highly recommend it to scholars interested in these subjects, especially those who work on the interdisciplinary study of religion, gender and popular culture.