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God And Man At The Olympics

Posted August 21, 2008 | 04:49 PM (EST)



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I'm a huge gymnastics fan, so beyond the excitement of the women -- who always get tons of press coverage -- it was great to see the men do so well, especially after injuries sidelined the Hamm brothers. Raj Bhavsar -- who deserved to be on the team outright -- switched from an alternate to a major player in helping the men snag a team bronze medal. Alexander Artemev -- who is famously inconsistent -- was the last man standing and had to accomplish his crowd-

pleasing, extremely difficult pommel horse routine under the most intense pressure imaginable. And succeeded brilliantly. And sparkplug **Jonathan Horton** led the team throughout the event, giving the performance of his life on apparatus after apparatus.

So I was cheering Horton when he competed on the horizontal bar for an individual medal. At the last minute, Horton added in some hugely challenging elements because he knew he didn't have a chance of medaling without them. Before he was ready to go, Horton was bending down next to those giant tubs of chalk the athletes are always dipping their hands into. Horton bowed his head for a moment, collecting his thoughts, and I wondered if he was praying.

It wouldn't surprise me. I spoke to Horton about his faith at Madison Square Garden during a pre-Olympics event. "Definitely, I live my life by Phillipians 4:13: 'Do all things through Him which strengthens me,'" said Horton when I asked him if there were any Bible passages in particular that inspired him. (I knew his faith was important to Horton, who is a Southern Baptist. The exact quote from King James that he paraphrased is: "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.") He then pulled out a medallion hanging around his neck. "My sister gave me this. It says, 'Thanks be to God who gives us the victory.' I keep my faith in the Lord knowing that He'll keep me safe. That's how I get through this sport because it's so crazy and pretty intense."

We didn't have much time to talk but I started to raise the question of faith in sports. Personally, I find it absurd for athletes to praise God and give thanks for winning an event, as if God cares about someone winning the 100 meter dash. Surely such temporal matters are far beneath the concerns

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of God. People who think God would ever care about a high school football game or the World Series or Olympic diving -- to me -- have a very limited, earthbound idea about what truly matters. So I get annoyed when athletes point to the sky or act as if God wanted them to win the pole vault or weightlifting or ping pong. It's almost as silly as thinking God decided they SHOULDNT win a particular event because it's part of His plan.

When I jokingly said to Horton that it's hard to thank God when you've just fallen on your face (Have you ever heard an athlete praise God after LOSING an event? Not often.), Horton gave a winning reply. "I actually did a crazy release move a couple of years ago in Vegas and smashed my face on the bar. **Have you seen that?** I hit the ground and said, "Thank you I'm not dead," he laughed.

Which leads me to archery. **The New York Times uncovered a scandalous situation on the US archery team.** The brilliant head coach -- Kisik Lee -- has been abusing his position of trust by proseletyzing among the athletes and making those who don't follow his particular form of evangelical Christianity deeply uncomfortable. The USOC has been aware of the situation but since the athletes naturally are worried complaining will kill their chances on the team, the officials can generally turn a blind eye and say complaints have been rare.

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Lee makes several outrageous comments, such as that he finds it harder to coach someone who doesn't share his beliefs. If that's true, he doesn't deserve the job of coach. It would be unacceptable for a coach to say they find it hard to work with people of another race or gender. It's just as unacceptable for a coach to say he finds it "hard" to work with someone who is a Unitarian Universalist or Jewish or Catholic or Buddhist or -- God forbid -- an atheist. If he can't properly coach people in archery who profess different beliefs (which should basically never come up anyway), he doesn't deserve the name "coach" and should resign. Lee is the one being anti-religious here, not those who would complain.

Lee insists he can't help himself, that he naturally wants to bring people to Christ. But you don't bring people to Christ by abusing a position of trust. More bizarrely, he insists that Christians probably make better archers. Here's a quote that Bill Maher would love.

To be an effective archer, Lee said, athletes must learn to clear their heads and focus. "If you are Christian," he said, "then people can have that kind of empty mind." Asked if people of other faiths could learn to focus in the same way, Lee said he was not sure. "Maybe," he said. "But for me this is the best answer. So that's why I'm encouraging people to be the same as me."

Huh? Christians make better archers? What's the breakdown? Do evangelicals do better than Catholics? Do members of United Church of Christ get 7s and 8s in archery while Episcopalians hit more 10s?

Maybe Lee should go see **Bill Maher's documentary *Religulous*** for penance: none of the US archers medaled at the games. On the other hand, **Horton scored a terrific silver medal** in the horizontal bar. And I'm sure one of the first thoughts running through his mind was, "Thanks be to God who gives us the victory."

I believe the role of faith in sports should be simply to help you win with humility and lose with grace. God does NOT care about sporting events and doesn't waste His time deciding who will win, who will lose, who will get a career-ending injury and who will use their defeat to come back four years later and stick a landing for the Lord.

So what do you think? When athletes point to the sky after winning an event and give all praise to God, are they just righteously giving the credit where credit is due? Or are they confusing personal glory and accomplishments with what really matters? Do you find it annoying or inspiring?

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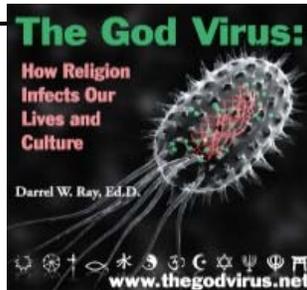
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tsw22 See Profile I'm a Fan of tsw22 permalink

I'm still bothered by your photo of Tina Thompson. Are there any plans to replace it? Becky Hammon thanked Jesus Christ, her personal savior, after winning a Bronze medal with the Russian basketball team. Why not post a photo of her?

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 05:48 PM on 08/25/2008

Dave24 See Profile I'm a Fan of Dave24 permalink

When good things happen: Thank God. When bad things happen: God is testing you. It's amazing how believers compartmentalize. Pretend God isn't there. When good things happen, they happen. When bad things happen, they happen. It's the same friggin thing.

Stop giving credit to God, and start giving credit to hard work and determination.

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 03:26 PM on 08/25/2008

sylviag See Profile I'm a Fan of sylviag permalink

It just touched my heart to see athletes getting to the end line and seemingly forgetting the cheering and closing their eyes to focus in what mattered to them.

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 07:06 PM on 08/24/2008

marlovian See Profile I'm a Fan of marlovian permalink

God is the most extreme sports fan in the ultimate fantasy league. God's always a winner, though even he might not remember how many houses he owns.

♥ Favorite ⚡ Flag as abusive Posted 05:07 PM on 08/24/2008

rhaynes See Profile I'm a Fan of rhaynes permalink

I think many of you may misunderstand what the athletes are praying for. They may not be praying for victory over their opponents, but rather the strength and courage to do their best. I find my faith in God gives me great strength, especially when I feel myself losing courage, in whatever I do, and regardless of the outcome. Of course, the athlete wants to win and when he/she does, it's natural to give thanks to God for the strength, focus, energy (whatever it took) to have done as well as they did, with great respect for their opponents. God didn't choose them to win, of course, but rather the athlete's faith in his/her maker (the source of all) may have given them an extra dose of oomph to make it happen. And yes, it's true that even the most ardent Christians can be disappointed when they lose -- we are only human, after all -- but later, if they are true believers, they give thanks to God for the chance to have competed and come as far as they have and perhaps pray for another chance to come their way.

♥ Favorite ⚡ Flag as abusive Posted 01:33 PM on 08/24/2008

Michael Giltz See Profile I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz permalink

Hi Rhaynes, thanks for reading. I appreciate your point of view and saying "God didn't choose them to win, of course." But then you say that their faith "may have given them an extra dose of oomph to make it happen." That still sounds exacty like saying people of stronger faith ae more likely to win a gold medal in doubles ping poing than people of lesser faith. Doesn't that seem silly? That yur faith can help you succeed in curling or synchronized diving or badminton? And again, praying for another chance to win at badiminton -- another chance fr what, personal glory? -- seems hardly the point of prayer. It's like praying before you pull the lever on the slot machine in Vegas. I just don't think God cares at all and I believe heathens can kick my ass in wrestling or crew or BMX mountain biking no matter how hard I train and pray. But I hope more athletes have your modest perspective than what I fear: that they believe God really DOES want them to win a sporting event, which really trivializes God and faith in my book.

♥ Favorite ⚡ Flag as abusive Posted 08:46 PM on 08/24/2008

provgrays See Profile I'm a Fan of provgrays permalink

Many athletes are worshipping themselves when they prance around pointing to the sky. I'm especially bothered by football players who drop to one knee in the end zone after scoring a touchdown. This is clearly a personal display and is often about calling attention to themselves.

It's not up to me to say who is sincere in these displays and who is not, but in most cases, it appears to be ego, not faith.

♥ Favorite ⚡ Flag as abusive Posted 11:47 AM on 08/24/2008

goodgravy See Profile I'm a Fan of goodgravy permalink

in my crazy effed up family if something good happens to you then you praise god. if something bad happens then you blame the devil.

it's a very convenient avoidance mechanism for people who can't think for themselves or accept any personal responsibility.

♥ Favorite ⚡ Flag as abusive Posted 12:51 AM on 08/23/2008

KarlAdam See Profile I'm a Fan of KarlAdam permalink

I often wonder whether athletes making such a show of their personal beliefs on camera realize how offensive their behavior looks to many Christians. As if they were thanking God for a personal favor, preferring them over their fellow competitors. It doesn't come across very Christian to the viewers for sure.

♥ Favorite ⚡ Flag as abusive Posted 07:55 PM on 08/22/2008

Dave24 See Profile I'm a Fan of Dave24 permalink

100%

♥ Favorite ⚡ Flag as abusive Posted 06:22 PM on 08/25/2008

Roger TQ See Profile I'm a Fan of Roger TQ permalink

The writer of this article brings up some good questions. I used to wonder the same thing.

Why do people say, "I just want to give God the glory" after they do something like that - when God isn't here? But isn't God the source? He has created us. We don't create ourselves. God puts the talent and desire in us. He gives us the breath to wake up in the morning. He gives us the ability to practice, improve, and excel. Giving God the glory and thanking Him isn't saying that God is taking sides and rooting for one person over another. It's simply acknowledging that God DOES CARE and IS INTIMATELY involved in our lives as He has created us and given us the ability to do these things.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 10:48 AM on 08/23/2008

Michael Giltz - Huffpost Blogger I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz permalink



See Michael Giltz's Profile

Thanks for reading Roger. But my belief is that God does NOT care in the least about the 4x100 relay or doubles ping pong or the Super Bowl or any other worldly event like sports. I can't imagine God caring in the least for something so transitory, except that earthly glory and fame and wealth could endanger our soul. God has given us the ability to swim or run but that's no important than the fact that God has given us the ability to spit or tie our shoes. True, but so what? Why would God care in the least about such silly, unimportant things we do to entertain ourselves on this earth? Why would God care who wins the Super Bowl any more than a parent would care which little boy builds a bigger sandcastle? You'll cheer both children and pat them on the head but never think for a moment that such a thing matters. And if one boy praised God for his lump of sand, you'd think it was cute or silly but obviously absurd.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 02:54 AM on 08/24/2008

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wondering See Profile I'm a Fan of wondering permalink

Prove it. Prove god gave you anything. If you can't, then you are just making it up.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 12:30 PM on 08/23/2008

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joggle See Profile I'm a Fan of joggle permalink

From Jonathan Horton's hometown paper
(<http://www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/headline/sports/5952771.html>):

He began, as always, with a prayer.

"It's a sort of "don't let me die kind of thing," he said, laughing. "Today, it was "just give me strength, give me endurance." I pray for safety and the strength I need and the precision I need to get through the routine."

Understandable given the circumstances.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 06:41 PM on 08/22/2008

Twopennygal See Profile I'm a Fan of Twopennygal permalink

I find it very annoying. For example: When the runner who just won the silver says that she didn't win the gold because God didn't want her to... Give me a break! She won the silver because that was what she was capable of when she ran that race against the field she ran against.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 03:06 PM on 08/22/2008

dctackett See Profile I'm a Fan of dctackett permalink

it's the buddy christ syndrome, all of your successes are because christ is on YOUR side, all of your losses are ignored or thought of as, "ah, the big JC was trying to teach me something"... there are not magical superpowered being floating around helping people win games... or run faster, or jump higher, or swing around on a bar better than someone else. People who actually believe this are delusional, maybe it helps some by taking the responsibility/stress off of them... but really, if they won it is because they did better at that moment that their other person.

they should credit themselves, they are the ones that played a better game or what not...
If a gymnast won and was being interviewed and said "I'd like to thank the gymnastics fairy for giving me the strength to win." it would be HUGE, and they would be ridiculed to all ends... replace gymnastics fairy with "god" or "jesus" or "christ" and somehow it's ok...

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 [imfedup](#) [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of imfedup](#) [permalink](#)

What happens when there are Christians on both sides of the competition? Is he saying God has to decide in every single contest on earth, with all of the athletic competition going on every moment of every day SOMEWHERE, who He is going to "help" win THIS TIME? That seems like a lot of trivial decisions to me. I agree that His time could be better spent elsewhere . . .

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I have often shared similar thoughts...when I hear a football player/actor/singer/oscar winner thank god and say it was god's doing, I just have to think "Yeah, that's right, there are children going to bed sick, hungry, abused, molested or orphaned in every city, in every country in the entire world, but yeah, god's watching the Superbowl and putting everything he/she has into YOUR team winning"

Yeap...exactly. Thanks for a great essay on this, but it will never reach those who really need to read it.

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The photo you have coordinated with this article is misleading, though. I am almost positive that Tina Thompson is blowing a kiss to her 3-year-old son in the stands, and her family and friends, and her gesture has nothing whatsoever to do with any deity. You may owe her an apology for mis-using her image in this way. On the other hand -- thank you for realizing that there are women playing basketball at the Olympics. Tomorrow they will play for their FOURTH straight gold medal. (They actually WON in Athens... but all anyone heard about was the men LOSING) So some props to the women would be most appropriate. Go USA!

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Gold Silver Bronze
Great Britain 18 12 11

Germany 13 9 13

Netherlands 6 5 4

Belgium 0 0 0

Poland 3 4 1

Spain 4 6 2

France 5 13 15

Sweden 0 4 1

Denmark 2 2 3

Italy 7 7 10

Norway 1 4 2

Hungary

Finland 1 1 1

Estonia 1 1 0

Portugal 1 1 0

Austria 0 1 2

Greece 0 1 2

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Slovakia 3 2 1

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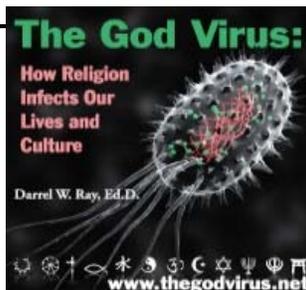
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