



PASS, PUNT, AND PROSELYTIZE?

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Dr. Eric Bain-Selbo

DR. ERIC BAIN-SELBO HAS FOUND A UNIQUE WAY TO MARRY HIS STUDIES IN RELIGION WITH HIS LOVE FOR SPORTS. BAIN-SELBO, WHO SERVES AS DEPARTMENT HEAD AND ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION AT WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY, WILL SOON PUBLISH A BOOK ENTITLED *GAME DAY AND GOD: FOOTBALL, FAITH, AND POLITICS IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH*.

About five years ago, Bain-Selbo attended a professional meeting and visited with a colleague who had begun research about University of Kentucky basketball fans. As he, too, had an avid interest in sports, he began to think about similar topics that would be appropriate for study in the South, and decided to research college football fans.





“Religion is like pornography,” he writes. “It can be very hard to define, but people seem to know it when they see it. Sometimes, however, what may not seem religious could be functioning religiously.” Thus, Bain-Selbo’s assumption is that if we think of religion in terms of myths and legends, heroes and saints, rituals and sacrifice, sacred sites and community, then we can come more and more to see sports in the modern world as religious.

“College football has played a role in helping the South overcome segregation.”

“College football is bound with the history of the South,” he explained. “Cultures themselves can be objects of worship. Southerners also have an identity of themselves that is separate from the rest of the country. My hope is that this book prompts people to think about these issues.”

Bain-Selbo’s book has been a three-year project that has included surveys, online research, and face-to-face interviews. As a football fan who grew up in Nashville and attended the University of Tennessee, he quickly learned the significance of college football in the South. The project began while he was

chair and associate professor of the Department of Religion and Philosophy at Lebanon Valley College in Pennsylvania. His research focused on five schools in the Southeastern Conference: Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana State, Ole Miss, and Tennessee.

“In my survey of college football fans in the South, conducted during the 2005 and 2006 seasons, I asked participants to provide me with words that described the game day

experience for them,” he writes. “Some of the words provided may or may not have religious connotations. For example, participants described the experience as fun, great, entertaining, drunk, utter chaos, and better than sex. Whether or not these make any sense in a religious context probably depends on what kind of religion you practice. But other terms were provided that easily could be used — and, in fact, stereotypically *have been used* — to describe religious experience. Friendship, fellowship, and community were used 40 times (out of a total of 220 surveys completed). These certainly are

positive terms used to describe the experience of religious organizations, rituals, or institutions. Excitement or exciting (46 times), tradition (17 times), awe-inspiring or awesome (15 times), passion or intensity (11 times) also were used frequently. Even terms like spirit (three times), love (four times), hope (once), godliness (once), heaven (once), and energy (twice) were used.”

In short, Bain-Selbo found that more than half of the respondents used at least one religious or possibly religious descriptor to explain the game day experience. “This is significant given the deeply religious context of the fans,” he explained. “No region of the United States is more religious than the South. The South often is equated with the ‘Bible Belt.’ Any number of surveys and polls indicate that Southerners are more likely to attend church on a regular basis than other Americans.”

Bain-Selbo found that Southern fans identified their game day experience as emotionally positive and powerful, often using religious or possibly religious descriptors to express how they experienced college football. “When asked to rank a number of aspects of their lives (family, friends, church, work, hobbies, etc.), fans ranked football just behind church as the place where they have ‘the deepest and most positive emotional experiences,’” he writes. “Given the importance of religion in the lives of many Southerners, the survey information at a minimum is suggestive of the power and importance of college football.

“In the end, I’ve gone further than I thought and there’s more to it,” Bain-Selbo continued. “It’s truer for some people than I thought. College football functions as religion, but it’s more compelling than I thought.”

Through his research, Bain-Selbo has found that college football and

religion share many similarities including the following:

A day of worship: For college football fans, that day is Saturday.

Well-known worship centers: In the SEC, those include Bryant-Denny Stadium in Tuscaloosa, Alabama; Neyland Stadium in Knoxville, Tennessee; Sanford Stadium in Athens, Georgia; and Tiger Stadium, aka "Death Valley," in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Large congregations: Tens of thousands join together for Saturday worship.

Fathers of their faith: Each school has its own but probably none is larger or more revered than Paul "Bear" Bryant at Alabama. "Bear Bryant is a godlike figure in Alabama for many people," he said.

Rituals and symbols: These include tailgating, pep rallies, team walks, fight songs, distinctive lettering or uniforms. "Tailgating is central to the whole ritual and is what separates college football from college basketball. You don't just show up and go to the game and go home," he said.

Hard-core believers: Like at church, the best seats and tailgating locations go to those who are longtime members or who arrive early.

A sense of community/fellowship: From the tailgating area to the stadium, thousands of people from various socio-economic and cultural backgrounds come together for one goal.

In addition to visiting game sites and conducting surveys and interviews, Bain-Selbo has conducted research on the Internet, read numerous books and reports on college football in the South, and visited the Bear Bryant Museum in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

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"In preparation for doing this, I would go to online chat forums and describe what I was doing," he said. His survey results include the following:

- 33 percent of respondents ranked their college football team to be higher in importance in their lives than church.
- 39 percent ranked their college football team higher than church in regard to where they experience the deepest and most positive emotions.
- 48 percent ranked their college football team higher than church in regard to where they experience the greatest sense of community.
- 59 percent ranked college football ahead of church in regard to the amount of income they spend on each.

Bain-Selbo also takes a look at how college football has affected the issues of race and class in the South. "College football has played a role in helping the South overcome segregation," he said, but "when looking at the issues of race and class, college football has functioned

to preserve the status quo and preserve the wealth and class of the upper echelon of society.

"Also, there are different degrees of fandom and different degrees of people who go to church," he explained. "We have the casual attendees and the first-pew people, for whom the institution is central to their identities and their lives. So it is with football."

Dr. Eric Bain-Selbo received his bachelor's degree in religious studies at the University of Tennessee (Knoxville) and his master's degree in religion from Miami University of Ohio. He received his Ph.D. from the Divinity School of The University of Chicago, where he studied religious ethics. He has published numerous articles, reviews, and essays, and has presented numerous papers and lectures. In addition to *Game Day and God*, he has published *Judge and Be Judged: Moral Reflections in an Age of Relativism and Fundamentalism* (Lexington Books, 2006) and *Mediating the Culture Wars: Dialogical Virtues in Multicultural Education* (Hampton Press). His family includes his wife and two children and, in his free time, he loves to golf and watch college football. ■



Paul "Bear" Bryant Museum at Alabama