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# Sports and Mainline Churches in Germany Societal Systems between Competition and Mutual Support

Martin Radermacher

## Abstract

In Germany, both the Roman-Catholic Church and the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) have been cooperating with the popular cultural domain of sports in various formats. This cooperation attests to the mainline churches' aspirations to engage with this field of popular culture in a sustainable manner. It may also be understood as one aspect of their attempt to counterbalance a loss of members and become more relevant in people's everyday lives. Potentially competitors, sports and the mainline Christian churches in Germany in this way renegotiate their relationship. In this article, I argue that this relationship is conceptualized as both partnership and competition. This discursive situation affects both the mainline churches and sports, but it leads to transformations at the expense of the churches. Therefore I suggest speaking of an asymmetrical relationship between mainline churches and sports.

## Keywords

Mainline Churches in Germany; Religion and Sports; Olympic Games; Church and Sports; Catholic Church; Evangelical Church

## 1. Introduction

In this article, I analyze the relationship of sports as a segment of popular culture and the mainline churches in Germany, i.e. the Roman Catholic Church and the Evangelical<sup>1</sup> Church in Germany (*Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland*, EKD). This is a valuable research focus as it demonstrates many of the challenges the mainline churches are facing in contemporary Western societies. The main hypothesis is that the mainline churches' attempts to engage with the popular cultural area of sports are an expression of their more general intention to regain territory in contemporary German society. The material analyzed for this study, i.e. theological books, articles, and other publications, as well as expert interviews, bears out the assumption that the interaction of sports and mainline churches leads to an asymmetrical relationship: Interacting with the world of sports, the churches run the risk of being perceived as simply supporting this popular cultural domain. Their original intention to implement Christian values in sports is less successful.

The relationship of church and sports is enacted in different ways: There are working committees and sports associations organized by the churches, such as the *DJK-Sportverband* on the Catholic and the *Eichenkreuz* (YMCA) on the Protestant side. Additionally, both mainline churches are present at sports events such as soccer championships and the Olympic Games. Originally in a competitive if not oppositional relationship, these bonds between the mainline churches and sports constitute a rather new development in Germany which has gathered momentum since the 1950s and 60s. Due to this development, the churches have to take seriously the value-ideas<sup>2</sup> of sports and reject them nonetheless – or at least set them in relation to their own value-ideas. This ambivalent situation results in discursive renegotiations of their partnership. Theoretically, this study contributes to understanding how religious worlds of thought are adaptive towards popular culture by re-contextualizing discursive motifs from the world of sports in their own interpretive language.

The mainline churches in Germany are privileged in their position of cooperation with institutionalized professional sports. No other religious community works with the German Olympic Sports Confederation (*Deutscher Olympischer Sportbund*, DOSB) in an official and continuous way, although the DOSB has sought conversations with the Coordinating Council of Muslims in Germany (*Koordinationsrat der Muslime in Deutschland*, KRM) since its foundation in 2007 (DOSB 2007). The Jewish sports association Maccabi is a “member with special tasks” in the DOSB, on one level with the Protestant (YMCA) and the Catholic sports association (DJK).

Considering the popularity of sports (not just) in Germany, it is not surprising that the mainline churches consider it as a potential field of activities. There are more than 90,000 sports clubs with about 28 million members. About 7 million people are active in more than 6,500 gyms, while countless others engage in recreational, unorganized sports such as running, biking, skiing etc. (Dresen 2016, 157).

In this article, I start with a review of previous research regarding the topic “sports and mainline churches in Germany” (section 2), arguing that the involvement of German mainline churches with the world of sports has so far only attracted a limited amount of non-theological, scholarly attention. Next, I present an overview of the situation of the mainline churches in Germany regarding their relation to sports (section 3), describing the historical development and institutionalization of their relationship. In section 4, I attend to the kinds of sports which are of relevance when looking at the entanglement of church and sports (section 4.1), focusing on the combination of spiritual retreats and sports (*Sportexerzitien*), the Olympic Games, and soccer. In the following subsection, I analyze the internal, theological rationalizations of this cooperation (section 4.2), arguing that church representatives’ engagement with sports leads to the paradoxical situation of both criticizing and supporting this popular cultural domain. In the final section, I review the material from a systematic perspective. The central hypothesis is that the mainline churches seek to reconnect to wider societal circles when they engage with sports. This engagement entails a re-negotiation of their relationship which is conceptualized both as partnership and competition. This discursive situation affects both the mainline churches and sports, but it leads to transformations at the expense of the churches. This is why I suggest speaking of an asymmetrical relationship.

For this study I conducted e-mail-interviews with experts in 2011 and I analyzed a variety of textual and non-textual primary sources, ranging from theological treatises to brochures and web sites. These different materials were studied by way of a content analysis, focusing on recurring topics and arguments as well as underlying structures.

## **2. State of research on the mainline churches in Germany and their relation to sports**

In the so-called Western world, sports is generally considered as “one of the most all-consuming forms of popular culture” (Fedorak 2009, 93), although it remains difficult to define. Many definitions of sports mention physical movement and discipline, competition in a regulated context, and the striving for enhancing performance (see e.g. Geldbach 1975, 12–13; Herms 1993, 53; Cusack 2016, 472). In the context of this article, however, it is not that important to define “sports” *ex ante*; rather, it is of interest how the mainline churches understand and interact with this popular cultural domain.

A few words about defining “popular culture” in general are due nonetheless (see also the introduction to this special issue): In contrast to “high culture” and “folk culture,” “popular

culture” has, according to Bruce D. Forbes, a larger audience and is often mass mediated. It “includes such expressions as television programs, movies, popular music, supermarket magazines, popular fiction (romance, detective, western), and much more” (Forbes 2000, 4). In his widely cited introduction to *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, Forbes also suggests that religion and popular culture relate to each other in at least four analytically distinguished ways: (a) religion in popular culture, (b) popular culture in religion, (c) popular culture as religion, (d) religion and popular culture in dialogue (Forbes 2000, 10). In the context of this article, we are mostly dealing with type (d) – religion (here: mainline churches in Germany) and popular culture (here: sports) in dialogue. The object of analysis, in this paper, is this dialogue, which relates to negotiations and cooperation, identity-building, and distancing.

According to Christopher Partridge, popular culture “is a residual category, an umbrella term for that which is left over once the parameters of ‘culture’ have been defined”; “culture” is understood here in terms of high or elite culture (Partridge 2009, 492). Philip Goff similarly describes popular culture as that which stands between high and folk culture (Goff 2012, 296). As this distinction is not always productive due to its normative premise, Hubert Knoblauch emphasizes the connective power of popular culture instead: Popular culture embraces all areas of highly fragmented post-modern societies. It is the sum of common, everyday knowledge and practices which enables communication beyond and between different societal groups (Knoblauch 2009, 237). To fulfill this function, popular culture “must appeal to the masses,” it needs to be broadly understood and should not differ too much from mainstream value-ideas (otherwise it would be counter-culture) (Goff 2012, 296). The category of popular culture encompasses much more than mass media and entertainment, it extends to books, fashion, coffee shops, music, cars, games, children’s toys, events such as pop concerts, fairs, and other competitions (Fedorak 2009, 3).

The research field of religion and sports in general has grown exponentially during the last few decades. Many scholars have focused on American Christianities and sports, the global popularization of yoga, or similar issues. This article, however, is not the place to give an overview of the international research field on sports and religion.<sup>3</sup> When it comes to the Christian mainline churches in Germany and their relation to sports, the number of publications is considerably smaller and dominated by theological approaches.

From a Protestant perspective, one should mention the works by Torsten Sternberg (e.g. Sternberg 2003; Sternberg 2005a; Sternberg 2005b) and Ommo Grupe (e.g. Grupe 2000; Grupe 2001). Both Sternberg and Grupe published widely on the history of Christian sports and on the cooperation of sports and the Protestant church. Grupe also co-edited an encyclopedia on ethics in sports (Grupe and Mieth [1998] 2001).

Catholic theologians have been a little more hesitant to discuss sports but, from practical perspectives, there are a number of works by Helmut Betz and colleagues (e.g. Waldau and Betz 2005; Waldau, Betz, and Krauß 2006), Stephanie Hofschlaeger (e.g. Hofschlaeger 2006), and Michael Kühn (e.g. Kühn 2003). While Betz is mostly interested in new forms of spiritual exercises, for example in combination with mountaineering, Hofschlaeger discusses the DJK, and Kühn published on pedagogical issues.

There are a few more papers of a sociological-theological kind (e.g. Dahl 1997; Pilz 2003; Rupp 2003; Mack 2005; Dahl 2008) which discuss the role of sports in the context of the German mainline churches. Hartmut Rupp, for instance, analyzes stadiums as “sacred places.” Elke Mack considers the ethics of sports from the perspective of the Christian mainline churches. These studies usually describe the relation of sports and churches in terms of mutual competition and cooperation. They do not analyze, though, how exactly this

ambivalent relationship is addressed in theological discourse and how it results in discursive re-entanglements. Instead, they tend to stress the importance of Christian values in professional, institutionalized team sports.

Interestingly, the scholarship on sports considers religion considerably less than the theological disciplines and when it does so, it is usually in the context of sports ethics or sports in educational contexts (e.g. Gabler and Göhner 1990; Grupe and Mieth [1998] 2001). This is a first indicator that – even on the level of scholarly publications – the relationship of sports and mainline churches is an asymmetrical one.

Apart from these more or less theologically engaged publications, there are some sociological studies, mostly in the tradition of Thomas Luckmann's *The Invisible Religion* ([1967] 1991) which have looked at the relation of mainline churches and popular culture in Germany – albeit without specific reference to sports. Hubert Knoblauch, for example, considers the mainline churches in Germany in relation to his wider theoretical concept of “popular religion” which is meant to dissolve the borders between church and non-church religion and to help us better grasp the contemporary transformation of religion (Knoblauch 2009, 12). He demonstrates that the churches appeal to popular culture in order to establish a stronger presence in broader societal circles while at the same time upholding boundaries towards popular culture (Knoblauch 2009, 283). In another article, Knoblauch takes a closer look at the relations between sports, religion, and the body. He states that we need research on how exactly the boundaries between the communicative systems of sports and religion are constructed and maintained (Knoblauch 2012, 45). The present article may be understood as a contribution to his question.

While these studies pay attention to the relation of mainline churches and popular culture in Germany, they do not look at sports as a segment of popular culture in particular. An exception is Stefanie Duttweiler (2012), whom I quote more extensively in a later section. All in all, the involvement of German mainline churches with the world of sports has so far only attracted a limited amount of scholarly attention.

### 3. Mainline churches and sports in Germany: Historical and organizational aspects

There is no state church in Germany and, in principal, all religious communities have the right to self-determination (Robbers 2001, 644–45). The Roman Catholic Church and the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) nevertheless enjoy privileged positions. With the status of corporations under public law, a status granted to religious communities once they fulfill certain requirements, they have specific rights and obligations in public life (Robbers 2001, 646). For instance, they offer religious education in schools, pastoral care in hospitals and prisons, and they are part of advisory boards of public broadcasting institutions (Liedhegener 2015, 147). They are also allowed to tax their members (Robbers 2001, 651). Generally, scholars speak of a cooperative or complaisant *partnership* between church and state, based on the *separation* of church and state. This cooperation, however, counts foremost for the mainline Christian churches (Liedhegener 2015, 144–47). While non-Christian communities may also have the status of corporations under public law, state partnership with the mainline churches has been publicly confirmed by several governments, e.g. under Willy Brandt and Helmut Schmidt in the 1970s (Mittmann 2015, 233). This is also, as Hugh McLeod points out, due to the fact that “the two ‘big Churches’ in Germany [...] were able to maintain a key role in the welfare system” (McLeod 2012, 479).

When it comes to sports, this generally privileged position is of value for the churches because sports associations consider themselves as legitimate partners of the state in the field of religion.

Although today many of the activities of the mainline churches in Germany regarding sports have an inter-confessional character, the history of the mainline churches and sports in Germany runs in two parallel currents, one concerning the Roman Catholic Church, and one the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD). I attend to these separately in a few paragraphs, starting with the Evangelical Church.

In the nineteenth century, Protestant communities in Germany sometimes offered physical education as part of their activities, usually for groups that also prayed and studied the bible together (Struve 2005, 91–93). These activities were institutionalized when, in 1925, a German version of the YMCA called *Eichenkreuz* was founded in Hanover (Geldbach 1975, 190). In 1934, under the rule of national-socialism, these groups were banned, although they had showed sympathy towards the regime. In 1947, they were reestablished (Geldbach 1975, 202–3). The intention of *Eichenkreuz* had been to enrich the quality of life through sports and to support the work of the YMCA (Struve 2005, 96). *Eichenkreuz* groups still exist today and they also send representatives to the working committees on “church and sports” (Struve 2005, 91–93).

The YMCA had been established before these *Eichenkreuz* groups. Founded already in 1844 by George Williams in London, it was established in Germany (Dresden) in 1874 (and 1883 in Berlin) (Schwank 2001, 90) and gained popularity in the United States too. The YMCA is commonly considered part of the wider current of evangelicalism (e.g. Geldbach 1975, 176) although it works within almost all Protestant communities. The YMCA deserves mentioning here as it has provided an important source of inspiration to the mainline churches’ engagement with sports: Sports constituted an integral part of the YMCA’s outreach and spiritual education. In the late nineteenth century, when non-religious sports associations were gaining more and more members, the churches sought to attract young people, foremost young men, to church-related activities (Sternberg 2005b, 10). This demonstrates that the mainline churches’ current aspirations to attract members are not as recent as they might seem. More recently, the Evangelical Church (EKD) has identified the field of sports as a central theme in their approach to what they call “culture.” In 1999 they defined sports as one of the most important fields of encounter; in 2006 they opened an office in Berlin dedicated to this task (Huber 2005, 10).

In 1920, the *Deutsche Jugendkraft* (DJK), roughly translated as “German Youth Power,” was founded in Würzburg as a Catholic sports association (Schwank 2001, 91). Today, it has about 500,000 members in more than 1,000 local clubs (Hofschlaeger 2006, 17). The DJK offers a general athletic program, officially based on Catholic principles. Notwithstanding the explicit foundation of this organization in the Catholic faith, many of their members in local sports clubs do not really identify with Catholic values and might not even realize that they are members of a Catholic association (Hofschlaeger 2006, 15). We can see here that the mainline churches’ engagement in the field of sports does not always have the desired results, which is due to their asymmetrical relationships: The value-ideas of sports have a larger impact and, in individual cases, may replace those of mainline Christian religion almost completely. From the perspective of the churches, though, this relationship is at least symmetrical, i.e. with equal rights and – for the churches – a morally superior position. From an analytical perspective, however, I argue that this relationship may be described as asymmetrical in the sense outlined in this paper.

The DJK and the YMCA in Germany are part of the cooperation between mainline churches and sports. Both were involved when the German Sports Confederation (*Deutscher Sportbund*, DSB), today German Olympic Sports Confederation (*Deutscher Olympischer Sportbund*, DOSB), was founded in 1950.<sup>4</sup> Their cooperation is mainly institutionalized in working committees: The working group “Church and Sports” of the EKD was founded in 1964 (Sternberg 2003, 42) and is in regular contact with the German Olympic Sports Confederation (DOSB) and the Catholic Church to realize the idea of a partnership of the mainline churches and sports (Sternberg 2005a, 181). Apart from the working committees, the presidents of the involved organizations meet about every five years for so-called “summit talks” which are meant to raise awareness and discuss selected current topics (“Kirchen und Sport” 2005, 14). The boundaries with the non-mainline spectrum of Christian churches in Germany blur, as is evidenced in the fact that *Eichenkreuz* (YMCA), and *Sportler ruft Sportler* (“Athlete Calls Athlete”), an evangelical sports ministry, are both members of the EKD working group “Church and Sports” (Sternberg 2005a, 183). In general, the EKD working group on sports and church is open to inter-confessional ecumenical exchange. It seeks to promote Christian values in sports and wants to encourage Christians to do sports, reminding them of the holistic nature of body and soul (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland 2010). Ten years after the EKD, in 1974, the Catholic Church established a parallel committee on church and sports (Sternberg 2005a, 182). Generally, it has the same functions and goals as the EKD working group.

Both working groups, together with the German Sports Confederation (DSB), published a declaration regarding their understanding of sports in 1990 (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland and Deutsche Bischofskonferenz 1990). In 2009, this declaration was renewed, proclaiming that the mainline churches and sports associations commit their efforts for the sake of the people (“Zum Wohle der Menschen”) (Huber, Zollitsch, and Bach 2009). In most of the federal states of Germany, there are subunits of this committee which organize cooperative events.

#### 4. Mainline churches’ approach to sports

When the mainline churches in Germany talk about sports, they usually think of institutionalized team sports, above all soccer, but also athletic competitions such as the Olympic Games. They also engage with non-institutionalized types of sports, such as recreational, individual, and wellness sports. Sometimes, these become part of their offers in pastoral care, for instance in so called *Sportexerzitien*.

##### 4.1 From soccer to yoga: Exemplary branches of sports

The practice of combining spiritual retreats with workouts and physical education is relatively widespread in Germany. These *Sportexerzitien* explicitly reference Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556) who is said to have invented the idea of spiritual retreats in the Catholic tradition (e.g. Angelis 2001, 504). The founder of the Jesuits and author of *The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola* (1522) provides guidance on a disciplined life in the Spirit, distinguishing spiritual from bodily exercises (Carrette and King 2005, 36–37). Saint Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582) is also frequently quoted with a saying attributed to her: “Treat your body kindly so that your soul enjoys inhabiting it” (e.g. Keilmann-Stadler 2006, 12). So, while *Sportexerzitien* are a

distinctly contemporary activity, strongly connected to popular cultural domains of wellness, fitness, and health, actors seek to firmly ground it in tradition. The mainline churches, in their own understanding of the matter, do not simply follow a popular contemporary trend.

Rather, they draw from their own traditional sources, which is indicative of the ways in which the religious system tries to encompass that of popular culture and sports.

These events profit from the general popularity of 'holistic health' (Puttick 2006, 246):

Retreats claim to offer benefits for "body, mind, and soul" by providing prayer and meditation as well as workouts and athletic games. At the same time, they aim to exclude all stressful elements such as competition or an undue glorification of the young and fit body. These kinds of sports include swimming, jogging, hiking, canoeing, and biking, i.e. recreational sports (Angelis 2001, 505–506). Athletic retreats are offered all over Germany, for instance by the working committee on church and sports in the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia or in the archdiocese of Cologne (C. Stanzel, pers. comm.).

In 2011, Helmut Betz (1941–2016) told me that he had encountered a fair deal of skepticism about *Sportexerzitien*. He would reply that the experiences made possible during these retreats help people in their everyday lives. Sports, community, and spiritual growth are combined in a unique way, he stressed. As part of the program of the DJK and the working group "Church and Sports," they include reading biblical texts, spiritual inputs, sports, and games. The intention of these activities is to "open a door to experiences which enable an individual understanding of the meaning of life" (Betz 2011).

Other examples, here quoted from the 2011 program of the Diocese of Münster (Bischöfliches Generalvikariat Münster 2010), extend to retreats where one can learn to handle bow and arrow to exercise attentiveness, or retreats that include yoga as a possibility of holistic experience. Other supposedly eastern body practices appear in the program too, such as "martial arts and prayer for young men," Qigong, and Tai Chi. Once more, it becomes obvious how the mainline churches adopt popular sports in their own programs to reflect and to align with popular sports culture on which they leave their own mark. The mainline churches want to be active in this field and not leave it to offers 'from the east' (C. Stanzel, pers. comm.). While in some non-mainline Christian churches, the question if Christians may do yoga is controversially debated,<sup>5</sup> the mainline churches usually take a more liberal point of view and discursively reframe these activities as both 'traditional' and spiritually beneficial. Also for Protestant Christians in Germany, it is not unusual at all to practice, for instance, yoga (see e.g. Finger 2012). These examples demonstrate the extent to which the mainline churches in Germany are able to incorporate elements from such popular cultural areas as yoga.

The **Olympic Games**, and especially their relation to and status as religion, have become a research topic in their own right (e.g. Müller 1996; Lindfelt 2011, 294; Alkemeyer 2012). In the context of this article, however, this perspective is not of major interest. Rather, it is noteworthy that both the Roman Catholic Church and the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) have appointed special priests to accompany the German Olympic team – so called "sports priests." They are responsible for pastoral care in the context of the Olympic Games. Klaus-Peter Weinhold, who acted as one of these priests in the German Evangelical Church (EKD) from 1990 to 2005, considers the Olympics as a condensed reflection of society and as such an event where the churches should participate (Weinhold 2005, 25–26). I seek to demonstrate in the next passages how church representatives legitimate their presence at this global event: Accepting the impact and popularity of the Olympic Games, they nonetheless take a critical approach at this globalized event by describing it as ethically questionable.



The EKD has had an official sports priest since 1970 when Martin Hörrmann became the first to be appointed for this job (Sternberg 2005a, 182). The Catholic Church was present at the Olympics of 1972 after the Second Vatican Council had spoken in favor of sports (Paas 1996, 92). Since then, the mainline churches offer daily prayer and services on Sundays. They accompany athletes, live with them in the Olympic Village, and offer counseling and spiritual guidance (Weinhold 2005, 24, 27). Soon they noticed heightened awareness by the media which they appreciated in times of perceived secularization: Journalists wanted to know why there were priests in the Olympic Village and what they did there (Paas 1996, 99).

It might be surprising to learn that the initial idea to have church representatives at the Olympic Games did not come only from the churches: The president of the National Olympic Committee in the 1960s, Willi Daume, invited the German Bishops' Conference to "inspire" and minister to athletes. He asked Cardinal Döpfner that the Catholic Church may publicly endorse modern competitive sports while taking care that sports occupies the "right place" in a young man's life (quoted in Paas 1996, 92–93<sup>6</sup>). Sports, so to speak, need an external voice lending legitimacy to its enterprise and 'purify' it.

The basic idea expressed in theological treatises is that sports, even in the context of the Olympics, needs a counterweight: a general moral orientation (Weinhold 2005, 24). The Olympics, Weinhold assumes, are in danger of becoming overrun by economic, commercial, and entertainment-related concerns and it is the churches' responsibility to counter this tendency (Weinhold 2005, 26–27). They want to bring certain values to the area of athletics, e.g. fairness and sportsmanship. They intend to take athletes seriously with their need for privacy by providing "safe spaces." Last but not last, they seek to counter the "cult of the body." The church, in short, should be a voice of morality and ethics in the field of professional sports (Weinhold 2005, 31–34).

Church representatives, to sum up, paint a negative picture of the Olympic Games, specifically of the 'moral situation' there, and, on that basis, characterize their activities at these events as crucially important. In a way, they have to take a double-edged position towards the Olympic Games, generally supporting but criticizing it nonetheless. This central paradox in the relation of the mainline churches and sports appears also in the next example.

**Soccer** is often considered the most popular sport in Germany and also internationally (Fedorak 2009, 93). The mainline churches are eager to enter this field of popular culture where they have, at least theoretically, the chance to engage with a large number of Christians and non-Christians alike. A manifest result of this aspiration are chapels in soccer stadiums. The stadiums in Berlin, Frankfurt, Gelsenkirchen, and Wolfsburg house Christian chapels under their roofs (Duttweiler 2012, 193).

The notion of soccer being functionally equivalent to religion and its relation to religious traditions has been discussed in the literature (e.g. Bromberger 1995; Rupp 2003; Brandt 2005; Hebenstreit 2012). Without repeating this discussion, it is an indicator that there is a special relationship of competition between soccer and mainline Christian religion in Germany if people claim that football is 'their religion' (e.g. Aka 2010, 12). One strategy to counter this tendency – and maybe, paradoxically, also to nurture it – is the mainline churches' engagement in professional soccer leagues.

Stefanie Duttweiler argues that the spatial vicinity of soccer and mainline churches, which is manifest in these chapels, enables the simultaneity of opposites (Duttweiler 2012, 194). Even in their architecture, these chapels claim a difference to the surrounding worldly affairs (Duttweiler 2012, 209–210, 212–213). Nonetheless, they are still situated within the world of commercial soccer. Quite traditionally, they seek to be *in* that world, but not *of* that world – and their architecture attests to this aspiration. The first such chapel was built in 1957 in

Barcelona (Roman-Catholic), followed by Gelsenkirchen (Evangelical) in 2001, Berlin (ecumenical) in 2006, Frankfurt (ecumenical) in 2007, and Wolfsburg (ecumenical, inter-religious) in 2015. All chapels were constructed as part of renovations and reconstruction of the sites (Duttweiler 2012, 200–201); the one in Wolfsburg has not been mentioned in previous literature (see e.g. VfL Wolfsburg 2015). There are no regular weekly services in these chapels; instead, there may be prayers before the matches, or rites of passage such as baptisms and weddings. Indeed, so many parents want to baptize their children in the Schalke-Arena (Gelsenkirchen) that the pastor can hardly manage all requests (Duttweiler 2012, 208–9). Here it becomes clearer why the presence of the mainline churches in soccer stadiums might even spur the development of a ‘football religion.’ When a Schalke adherent has the possibility to baptize her child on the ‘sacred ground’ of her ‘religion,’ even with official church staff, she might find her personal football faith affirmed. The border of soccer and religion blurs. Of course, this would be the exact opposite of what the mainline churches intend to happen (Dresen 2016, 161).

Interestingly, and similar to the engagement of the churches at the Olympics, the construction of chapels in stadiums was initiated by the soccer clubs themselves in at least three cases. The churches were even a little hesitant in the beginning. But they realized that they can use these places as contact points to get in touch with people usually not interested in the church (Duttweiler 2012, 206–8). However, even if this is generally possible, there are often barriers to cross when entering the chapel, for instance when they are in a secured area of the stadium or only accessible with a guide or pastor (Duttweiler 2012, 211).

From the perspective of the soccer club, the existence of chapels upgrades and maybe even ‘purifies’ their enterprise; they provide a counterweight to the (alleged) commerce and secularity of the soccer business. This is a difficult path for the mainline churches, however. They decided to take a step ‘towards the people,’ but run the risk of becoming advocates of a system of value-ideas that they do not principally support (Duttweiler 2012, 215).

Nonetheless, they take this risk because the potential advantages are clear: visibility in the media and the chance to interact with people who have distanced themselves from the mainline churches. Although it is virtually impossible to say if and how many people re-connect with their local church because of these chapels, their popularity is interpreted as an indicator of success (Duttweiler 2012, 208–9).

#### *4.2 Theological reasoning about sports*

Sports have become a societal field of crucial importance which the churches can no longer afford to ignore. This becomes visible, amongst other activities, in an increased amount of theological publications on sports. A selection of these books and articles, covering both Catholic and Evangelical sources, has been analyzed as primary sources for this paper.

At the beginning of these treatises often stands the observation of difference. There is talk of a “clash of cultures” (Kühn 2003, 145), at the heart of which lies the understanding of the role of the human body: Historically, Christianity, and especially Protestantism, has often been regarded as hostile to the body (Struve 2005, 94; Brändl 2010, 5) and therefore not prepared to develop theologically supported body practices. Being aware that this position does not attract a lot of members nowadays, the mainline churches have begun to develop new approaches to the body, its capacities, and to sports. However, churches also observe a so-called “cult of the body” in contemporary societies (Brändl 2010, 5), that lends undue prominence to the perfection of the body, and is concerned with making the physical body stronger, leaner, younger, and more beautiful, that comes close to idolizing it (Herms 2001,

495; Brändl 2010, 5). The churches do not view this as a proper way of thinking about the body and seek to offer a counterweight. As a result, their position must mediate between one of reluctance towards and appreciation of the body. They cannot wholeheartedly support the body-focused culture of perfection in contemporary 'Western' societies and therefore have to define a 'wrong' attitude to the body which is usually described as "cult of the body" (e.g. C. Stanzel, pers. comm.; H. Betz, pers. comm.). Using the term "cult" implicates that people are, at least principally, close to blasphemy when they 'idolize' the physical body. It is a double-edged sword, then, to both support and criticize popular recreational sports: The body and what it can do should never become a value in and of itself, Evangelical theologian Eilert Herms writes (Herms 2001, 496–97). Still, theologians tend to emphasize that the body should be appreciated 'in the right way.' This position has recently been reaffirmed by a committee consisting of representatives of the Catholic Church, the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) and the German Olympic Sports Confederation (DOSB): In a general statement on their cooperation, they emphasize that people's experience of their bodies helps them realize the holistic nature of their being. They object, however, to all sorts of "body cults" which overemphasize e.g. performance, physical strength, or beauty (Huber, Zollitsch, and Bach 2009, 1).

A secondary battle field which concerns the relationship between sports and the mainline churches centers around appropriate times for sports. In the 1950s and 60s, debates arose as to whether sports clubs were allowed to hold their games and events on Sundays, a day traditionally reserved for the churches' events (Hofschlaeger 2006, 15). In recent years, however, it has become clear that the churches do not stand the slightest chance of keeping or regaining their monopoly on Sunday as 'their' day. It is rather a rhetorical claim which they continue to put forward in the declaration already mentioned: The Sunday is described as a day for "family, friends, regeneration and attending services," and as a "social, cultural and religious good which is increasingly under economic interests" (Huber, Zollitsch, and Bach 2009, 2). Thus, churches and sports may declare neoliberal, capitalist economy as their *common* enemy. Now, suddenly, they fight together for the Sunday as a day of rest, service, games, and sports. Their old conflict is only mentioned briefly as a "potential conflict of interest" which should be "solved together" (Huber, Zollitsch, and Bach 2009, 2). We can see, then, how the discursive boundary work has changed considerably during the past half century and how new discursive alliances have been formed with regard to specific themes. There are a few biblical sources which theologians tend to quote in their texts to support their alliance with sports. Martin Brändl, pastor of the Evangelical Church in Mössingen-Belsen, quotes a few biblical passages that, to his mind, emphasize the value of physical movement, e.g. Psalm 139:3<sup>7</sup>, Matthew 28:19<sup>8</sup>, 1 Corinthians 9:26<sup>9</sup>, and Hebrews 12:1<sup>10</sup>. Most importantly, he quotes 1 Corinthians 6:19–20<sup>11</sup>, and is of the opinion that Paul, in this passage, articulates a holistic concept of the body: the human being as a unity of body, soul, and spirit (Brändl 2010, 4; see also Herms 2001, 496–97).

Based on these biblical passages, there emerged a discussion of the theological legitimacy of sports. The aforementioned saying attributed to Saint Teresa of Ávila – "Treat your body kindly so that your soul enjoys inhabiting it" – is often quoted at the beginning of these treatises (e.g. Siemes 2006, 5). Movement and sports, in these accounts, "make sense" (Brändl 2010, 4) not only because they find biblical support, but also because they make people experience their human constitution, including limits, frustration, and success (Brändl 2010, 4). The body is seen as the crown of God's creation, a "temple of the spirit." God should be venerated through the body – with strict avoidance of a misguided cult of the body (Kühn 2003, 150).

Another key element in the engagement of mainline churches in sports is the idea of being there for people. Although sports is a secular domain, it is one where the churches should strive to establish Christian values (Siemes 2006, 6). Therefore, many theologians who work in this area consider Christian mainline religion as the moral voice in sports. Indeed, Jutta Bouschen, then spokesperson of the DJK, demanded in 1993 that the churches should “have a serious talk” with sports (“dem Sport ins Gewissen reden“) (Bouschen 1993). As Klaus Hemmerle (1929–1994), former Roman Catholic bishop in Aachen, Germany, put it in the title of one of his papers: “Sports Needs Rules: Christianity Offers Orientation” (Hemmerle 1994). It is, in this sense, the intrinsic need for the mainline churches to spread their message in popular cultural areas which undergirds their engagement in sports. In a similar way, a recent manifest on the cooperation between the churches and the sports associations states that Christian mainline religion should work to cushion the potentially negative side effects of sports, such as an excessive orientation towards performance, practices dangerous to one’s health, and illegal methods (Huber, Zollitsch, and Bach 2009, 2). It is rarely considered, however, that sports has developed a set of values of its own. For example, the idea of fair play or sportsmanship was first promoted in the British sports movement of the nineteenth century (Eisenberg 2010) and still persists today, diffused into broader societal areas (Dunning and Sheard [1979] 2005, 111; Pilz 1997). Even if the churches accept that the idea of fairness emerged in the domain of sports, they argue that this is only of historical relevance and that, principally, it is an idea based on biblical values (e.g. Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland and Deutsche Bischofskonferenz 1990, 16–17). In short, there is a constant re-framing and re-contextualizing of values and notions that both results from and leads to dynamic discursive entanglements of mainline churches and sports in Germany.

The idea of being there for people and offering moral guidance in sports results in at least three ways in which sports may be harnessed by the mainline churches:

1) *Sports as ministry*: What is known as *Diakonie* in German (Greek διακονία = service) refers to the social and welfare activities of local and regional churches; it could also be translated as “ministry” or “outreach.” When the mainline churches engage in sports, they often view this as a “service to the people.” “Sports for the sake of the people,” this is one of the founding principles of the DJK, the Catholic sports association in Germany (DJK-Sportverband 2010). They want to help young people develop self-confident personalities, promote community, and be there when the big questions of life arise. In their perspective, they can do all this through sports, but a kind of sports that is guided by Christian values (DJK-Sportverband 2010; see also Siemes 2006, 5–6).<sup>12</sup>

2) *Sports as a means of education*: As sports plays such a big role in the lives of young people, it is also a place of learning. According to the churches, people should learn about moral values, sociality, fairness and togetherness, and thus acquire competences they will need in many areas of their lives (Kühn 2003, 147). Education is not only cognitive but includes spiritual and physical aspects too. Both sports and religion should therefore be taught in schools (Huber, Zollitsch, and Bach 2009, 3). Representatives of churches and sports frequently repeat this demand (Lehmann 2005, 4; Richthofen 2005, 8; Huber 2005, 12). As in the case of opposing “economy” (see above), churches and sports associations once more become allies: They present themselves as disadvantaged compared to scientific and technical disciplines, which are more prominent in general school education.

3) *Sports as a means to experience spirituality*: A few theological authors even go so far as to accept sports as a way to experience and deepen Christian spirituality. For Helmut Betz, the body is a “gate to spiritual experience”: Exercised in the right way, it triggers and deepens spiritual growth (H. Betz, pers. comm.). Bernward Siemes, a Catholic youth advisor, writes

that sports offers the chance to experience breath and movement as gifts from God which should be savored with all senses (Siemes 2006, 6–7). From a different angle, Henrik Struve, who works in the German YMCA, highlights the potential of sports as a tool for evangelism, particularly when working with young people (Struve 2005, 102).

The mainline churches in Germany, to summarize, find different ways to interact with and adopt ideas and practices from the popular cultural domain of sports, which are all guided by the – principally assumed – moral superiority of the Christian faith. This section has demonstrated, how exactly this endeavor is rationalized and discursively realized.

## 5. Conclusions: Negotiations of a relationship

This last section of the article has a systematic look at the aforementioned examples and developments. The perspective taken in this article is not a theological one but considers the field of “mainline churches and sports” from a religious studies point of view. Contrary to the positions outlined in section 2, I have not taken an insider’s perspective, e.g. outlining how the mainline churches *should* engage with sports. Instead, I have taken a closer look at how exactly the relationship of sports and mainline churches is contested and discursively re-contextualized. In taking up sociological and religious studies approaches to the field, and specifically bearing in mind Hubert Knoblauch’s call for a closer analysis of how the boundaries between the communicative systems of sports and religion are constructed and maintained (Knoblauch 2012, 45), I argue that the mainline churches’ attempts to cooperate with the popular cultural area of sports are a symptom of their more general intention to regain territory in the highly differentiated landscape of post-war society in Germany. Functionally differentiated subsystems, religion and sports find themselves re-entangled. Their mutual roles in this process variegate between opponents and allies. This complex situation affects both systems, but the mainline churches more than sports – this is why I speak of an asymmetrical relationship. Following Luhmann (1985, 19), religion, i.e. the mainline churches, and sports function on the basis of different logics: sports on the basis of victory vs. defeat (Cachay and Thiel 2000; Gugutzer and Böttcher 2012, 11), and religion on the basis of immanence vs. transcendence. These distinctions entail different value-ideas: Sports and religion are different and, from the inside-perspective, must be so in order to maintain their identity and their cultural capital. The churches’ representatives keep emphasizing that sports will never become a substitute for religion (e.g. Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland and Deutsche Bischofskonferenz 1990, 10; Huber, Zollitsch, and Bach 2009, 1) and that they do not agree with many of its value-ideas (“body cult,” “commerce,” etc.). Nonetheless, they have started to accept the fact that in contemporary societies, they no longer hold the monopoly on meaning and salvation, and that they compete with the entire domain of popular culture (Ernst 2003, 172). But instead of fighting against the dominance of sports – something they did, quite unsuccessfully, in the 1950s and 60s (“Sunday-debate”; e.g. Sternberg 2005a, 184) –, they now seek cooperation, which has turned out to be a difficult task: Cooperating while still maintaining a solid and visible religious identity, being complementary without merging. What the mainline churches do, then, is to accept the value-ideas of sports but subordinate them to their own value-ideas. Sports has taken its place in popular culture but it still needs moral values that only the churches can provide, or so the usual argument goes. Sports, from the perspective of the churches, is often under the dictate of commerce and capitalist consumer culture, which exploits athletes and degrades them to simple actors in a global show (e.g. Weinhold 2005, 26–27). The mainline churches

do not, however, consider the fact that sports has developed value-ideas of its own, that they have their own categories of 'wrong' and 'right,' highly regulated frameworks, sanctions, and a codex of 'fair play' (Dunning and Sheard [1979] 2005, 111). Both sides profit from these attempts at cooperation, albeit in different regards: The 'inner-worldly' affairs of sports receive a 'blessing' from the 'other-worldly' domain of religion<sup>13</sup>; the churches regain public awareness, and a share of the popularity of sports.

As a final note, the mainline churches are not just in competition with sports, but also with non-mainline, evangelical churches which often prove to be much more flexible and adaptive towards contemporary fitness and wellness culture (for the US context, see Radermacher 2017). Mainline churches' representatives usually describe the activities of such churches in pejorative terms. Weinhold, for instance, writes that the evangelical churches advertise themselves at sports events. On the other hand, he thinks the mainline churches should learn from them how to use sports events for evangelizing and spreading their message in a positive way (Weinhold 2005, 28). It is in a double competitive relationship, then, that the mainline churches in Germany seek to find their place in sports.

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, "Evangelical" in upper case shall translate to "Evangelisch" and refers to the Protestant mainline church in Germany (EKD); "evangelical" in lower case shall refer to non-mainline Protestant Christianity, including charismatic and Pentecostal communities.

<sup>2</sup> With the concept of "value-idea" I follow Louis Dumont who suggests "not to separate an idea and its value but to consider instead as our object the configuration formed by idea-values or value-ideas" (Dumont 1986, 252).

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Hoffman (1992); Ladd and Mathisen (1999); Price (2000); Putney ([2001] 2003); Rupp (2003); Hoverd (2005); Baker (2007); Hoffman (2010); Singleton (2010); Syman (2010); McLeod (2013); Cusack (2016). The majority of these studies deals either with evangelical perspectives on sports or yoga. Many of them (e.g. Price 2000; Hoverd 2005) follow the idea that sports are in many ways *functionally equivalent* to religion and may even act as substitutes to the tradition religions.

<sup>4</sup> In 2006, the DSB and the National Olympic Committee (NOK) were merged in the German Olympic Sports Confederation (Deutscher Olympischer Sportbund, DOSB) which continues the cooperation with the mainline churches (Huber, Zollitsch, and Bach 2009, 1)

<sup>5</sup> Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, e.g. unmistakably states that Christians should not practice yoga (Mohler 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Willi Daume to Julius Döpfner, April 10, 1967: "Ohne aufdringlich zu werden und ohne falsches Machtstreben müssten daher die Sportler von ihrer Kirche ermuntert und betreut werden. [...] Es ist meine Bitte, dass die Katholische Kirche gelegentlich ein deutlich vernehmbares Ja zum modernen Leistungssport sagen möchte. Wohl verstanden, zu jenem Leistungssport, der im Leben eines jungen Menschen den ihm angemessenen Rang einnimmt. Dabei müssen wir aber gemeinsam beispielsweise dem jungen Olympia-Kämpfer helfen, das zu bleiben, was er von Natur aus ist, und dabei nicht nur seine Glieder und Organe, sondern wiederum den ganzen Menschen mit Leib und Seele und Familie und Beruf und geistigem Anspruch im Auge haben. Das ist wichtiger als der Rekord oder die Goldmedaille. Aber der große sportliche Sieg ist eben doch auch wichtig" (quoted in Paas 1996, 92–93).

<sup>7</sup> Psalm 139:3: "You scrutinize my path and my lying down, and are intimately acquainted with all my ways" (New American Standard Bible).

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew 28:19: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (New American Standard Bible).

<sup>9</sup> 1 Corinthians 9:26: “Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air” (New American Standard Bible).

<sup>10</sup> Hebrews 12:1: “Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us” (New American Standard Bible).

<sup>11</sup> 1 Corinthians 6:19–20: “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body” (New American Standard Bible).

<sup>12</sup> Another field of societal relevance where the mainline churches and sports seek to unite their impact and make themselves indispensable is in the area of “integration.” Recently, there have been efforts to capitalize on the much-discussed need to integrate people from different cultures and societies (Lehmann 2005, 3; Gemeinsame Kommission Kirche und Sport 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the tabloid newspaper *Sport Bild* published an article with the heading “Church Blesses the Championship” (“Kirche gibt der WM ihren Segen”) in September 2005 (quoted in Siegel 2005, 16).