

ONWARD CHRISTIAN ATHLETES: AN INTERVIEW WITH TOM KRATTENMAKER

Paul Louis Metzger*

You can learn a lot about the relationship between American religion and sports from journalist Tom Krattenmaker. You can also learn a lot about Tom Krattenmaker from his personal story with American religion and sports.

So, who is Tom Krattenmaker? Tom serves as a member of *USA Today's* Editorial Board of Contributors and writes regularly for the paper's "On Religion" commentary page. In addition to authoring the provocative book on American Evangelicalism and sports, *Onward Christian Athletes: Turning Ballparks into Pulpits and Players into Preachers*,¹ his article, "The Evangelicals You Don't Know" (*USA Today*, Opinion, June 2, 2008), received critical acclaim as one of the top three pieces of religion commentary in the American Academy of Religion's 2009 Journalism Awards program.

I asked Tom for an interview to discuss his journey into the realm of American religion and sports as well as his own faith journey. What makes Tom especially interesting is that he is a journalist who positions himself as a member of the religious and cultural left (attending a Unitarian Universalist Church and serving as Associate Vice-President for Public Affairs and Communications at Lewis and Clark College), who engages American Evangelicalism fairly, openly, and insightfully. Here's what Evangelical leader Kevin Palau, Executive Vice President of the Luis Palau Association, has to say about Tom and his work: "Tom Krattenmaker—in my opinion—is one of the most informed and relevant writers on the Evangelical movement today. His critique is fair and his knowledge is impressive." No doubt, some of his insights and expertise in this area derive from Tom experiencing numerous courtships with Evangelicalism over the years, including flings with Young Life and Campus Crusade for Christ. None of these flings with Evangelical Christianity stuck, but his fascination with the movement has not diminished.



* Paul Louis Metzger is Professor of Christian Theology and Theology of Culture, director of The Institute for the Theology of Culture: New Wine, New Wineskins, and editor of *Cultural Encounters* at Multnomah Biblical Seminary; pmetzger@multnomah.edu.

1. Tom Krattenmaker, *Onward Christian Athletes: Turning Ballparks into Pulpits and Players into Preachers* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009).

Paul Louis Metzger [PLM]: Tom, we Evangelicals like personal testimonies. So, please share your story of your fascination with Evangelical Christianity and faith over the years, coupled with your passion for professional sports.

Tom Krattenmaker [TK]: I like that word you're using, "flings." I guess the term fits. When I was an undergraduate, I participated pretty deeply in Campus Crusade for Christ activities for about a year—lots of meetings, a weekend winter retreat, hearing Josh McDowell speak at our campus basketball arena, etc. But for whatever reason, it didn't stick, and I drifted away. I've been involved in Unitarian congregations much of my adult life. I was youth group co-adviser for about four years at the church I belonged to back in the Philadelphia area before I moved to Portland in 2006. Through all of it, I've never lost my fascination with Evangelicalism or the feeling of being very drawn to, and inspired by, Jesus.

Regarding sports, I'm still kind of amazed by an experience I had when I was a kid and a brand-new sports nut. In retrospect, it seems that maybe I was destined eventually to write a book about evangelism through sports! Without really knowing what I was getting into, I attended an Evangelical revival at the Minnesota Twins ballpark with a friendly neighborhood family when I was about nine. Twins pitcher Al Worthington was the main speaker. He concluded by having us all stand up and accept Jesus! That experience probably stayed with me in some fashion and led to my writing this book.

PLM: Give us a brief overview of your book, and tell us a bit about its reception, especially among Evangelicals.

TK: Pro sports fans see a lot of religious expression in big-time sports—players pointing up to God after a touchdown or home run, for example, or thanking and praising Jesus in post-game interviews—and that was my starting point for the research. As I began to dig into it, I was struck by how much organization and strategy exists behind and under all this. Not to say it's secret or sinister or anything, because it's not, but fans don't realize how much work goes on out of the spotlight by these Christian organizations that minister to athletes and leverage sports to reach the public with their evangelistic message. My book attempts to document what's happening with Christianity in big-time sports, explain how and why, and develop some constructive ways of thinking about it.

The reaction from Evangelicals has been fascinating. There's one school of thought that says, "Just more anti-Christian hostility by a left-wing secularist." On the other hand, there are a good number of non-defensive Evangelicals, including some of the change agents in sports ministry, who welcome my book and who have been very encouraging. It turns out that they share many of my concerns and critiques about sports-world Christianity in its current shape and form.

PLM: *Cultural Encounters* book review editor, Brad Harper, has this to say about former University of Florida quarterback, Tim Tebow, and his public expressions of his Christian faith: "I feel the same way about Tim Tebow and the way he wears

Bible verses printed on the black anti-reflection patches under his eyes as I do about church signs with clever Jesus clichés. They trivialize Jesus. The image of Tebow sitting in the locker room after a big game and peeling Jesus off of his face [Scripture or written word serving as a symbol for the living Word] and throwing him in the trash is quite disconcerting. American Christians would never do such a thing with the American flag, but we will do it with images of Jesus. Stunning!" How would you respond, Tom?

TK: I'm blown away by that perspective. What a good point! And the point has special credibility coming from someone like Brad as opposed to me, the non-Evangelical journalist. May I quote that in the column I'm working on about Tim Tebow and the Super Bowl commercial he's doing?

PLM: In the book, you seem to suggest that Christian athletes (of the Evangelical variety) often force public expressions of faith, looking for any opportunity to market their Christianity. What might this say about Evangelicals as it relates to public discourse? Do you think we as a movement have a hard time understanding what public discourse sounds like?

TK: What it says is that Evangelicals, for the most part, have been more interested in talking than in listening. Now, this critique sticks to the entire culture. It's not just Christians. I mean, everyone is out there promoting their ideas and beliefs and shouting their truth from the mountaintops, whether it's political or religious or even stuff like who's your favorite rock band. But there doesn't seem to be enough *listening*.

It's instructive that you use the word "force," because that's what it sounds like to many of the non-Evangelical sports fans out there who don't appreciate the religious expression of a Kurt Warner. It feels like some of these Christian athletes are *forcing* the religious message in a setting and at a moment where it doesn't fit. Knowing what I do about Evangelicals, I realize that it makes all the sense in the world to Kurt Warner. Speaking out about his faith is who he is. But there's a disconnect between separate cultures that gets exposed by this dynamic.

PLM: I don't sense at all that you are telling Evangelical Christians to stop talking publicly, but to do it more wisely. What suggestions might you make given your expertise in this sphere?

TK: That's absolutely right. I make it very clear in my book and the interviews I've been doing that I'm not for a separation of church and sport. I'm for a more thoughtful and inclusive form of faith in the game.

Here's one suggestion for Christian athletes: Talk about Jesus whether you win or lose. That will go a long way toward restoring the credibility that's been lost by the consistent connection between Christian religious expression and moments of victory. To the uninformed public, it often sounds like these guys are saying that God gave them the victory or favored them personally in the game, and lots of

people in the sports-consuming public think that's downright silly—even heretical if they know much about the faith. I know Evangelicals who feel the same way. To use the term favored by many of my Christian friends, I think a little *discernment* could go a long way.

PLM: The American Academy of Religion praised your work on Evangelicals for critiquing common misconceptions and pointing out that “something new, something more complex and subtle is going on—a great goal for religion commentary.” What do you see going on? Any idea as to what has triggered this shift? Beyond the realm of athletics, what communication tips would you give to Evangelical Christians, especially if they want to be good witnesses in the public sphere?

TK: I think what's going on is that more and more Evangelicals are unwilling to play by the old rules and march in the old culture-wars formation. I'm a huge fan of this development! I found this dynamic in my interactions with Athletes in Action in researching the book. Many of these guys, including the current president of AIA (Athletes In Action), are very well aware of the poor reputation that Evangelical Christians have in many quarters, and to their credit, they're not defensive about it and not ready to dismiss it as mere anti-Christian hostility. They're listening to what the unconverted public has to say about them and they are keen on making adjustments to better connect with “the rest of us.” This is smart. And I really believe this will help lead to more understanding between parts of our culture that have been at war with one another, rhetorically speaking.

In my opinion, the Christians should be the ones speaking out most clearly, and most prophetically, against the abuses and excesses we see in big-time sports. There's our idolatrous fixation on sports victories, for example. The huge amounts of money changing hands, sometimes at the expense of the public good. The abuse of men's bodies, and the various forms of racism and exploitation that happen in sports. Not that it's the Christians' job alone, but I think because of their faith and their idealism, they have something special to offer on this front. I love sports and don't mean to say they're bad. But they've gotten out of control, and in ways that are in direct conflict with Christian values.

PLM: In addition to the discussion of triviality above, what do you make of the tendencies to promote celebrity spirituality and the prosperity gospel in American religion? Here I am thinking of how Evangelicals target sports celebrities, and also about how Christian athletes rarely if ever mention Jesus when they or their teams lose. In other words, given Evangelical targeting of sports celebrities, are we saying that Jesus needs sport celebrities to win people over to his side? And does the absence of sound bites on Jesus after Christian sports celebrities' losses suggest that Jesus only helps the winners, and if you don't win, something's wrong with you—or even Jesus?

TK: Your question reminds me of the somewhat shocking thing the late-great Reggie White said after he retired from pro football, and after he had a change of heart about the live-interview evangelism he did so much to popularize. As the

more reflective Reggie put it after his playing days, “God doesn’t need football to let the world know about him.” But to answer your question, yes, absolutely, the rhetoric and context of sports evangelism does make it appear that Jesus needs high-profile sports and athletic victories for his message to be made known. This is very problematic! Especially at a time when the prosperity gospel seems to be gaining hold, to the detriment of Christianity’s integrity and to the detriment of faith-based efforts to combat poverty. I agree with what AIA’s Ed Uaszynski says in my book: God is with the losers. This highlights the problem with the celebrity endorsement model. It begins to appear that the more successful you are, the more *Christian* you are, and that faith is principally about getting ahead in life or on the scoreboard.

PLM: Do you think there is any connection between Tim Tebow’s Decal Jesus and the inability of Evangelical Christianity to stick to you?

TK: Yes. I hadn’t thought of it in those terms, but you’re onto something with that framing. For me, and I suspect for many would-be Jesus followers, it’s this reductive doctrinal rigidity that turns us away from Evangelicalism. And the showy display of “decal Jesus” in the context of athletic combat, i.e., football, is also problematic. It’s that crusader element that I’m getting at, on one level, with the title I use for my book, “Onward Christian Athletes.”

PLM: Historically, Evangelicalism has been known as a renewal movement—not just personally but also socially. I believe you raise the point in your book that the sports world needs some renewal given the materialism and commercialism and other -isms associated with it. So, Evangelicals, including professional athletes, can play a prophetic role in redemptively challenging these structures. Yet, I think we often undermine social renewal, domesticating Jesus through our public promotion of him through deity decals and sound bite spirituality. In John 2, we find Jesus revitalizing temple worship by overturning the tables of the money-changers. So often, we have replaced the church with the stadium as the center of worship today, turning Jesus’ Father’s House into SportsCenter. From your vantage point, how might we Evangelicals speak more prophetically as a movement, overturning the tables in our public discourse for the sake of rightful worship of Jesus and his Father today in the power of the Spirit?

TK: A first step must be the creation of some critical distance between faith and big-time sports. To listen to many of the sports-world Christianity promoters is to get the idea that Christianity and sports are perfect partners, that they “go together like peanut butter and jelly,” as Deion Sanders (in)famously said. To me, that’s a troubling distortion of what to me has always been the essence and beauty of Jesus’ teaching and Jesus’ example. I deal with this in one chapter of my book and talk about the obvious dissonance between sports values and Christian values.

Once sports-world Christians can regain perspective—and I think the movement is starting to do that, thankfully—they can better exert the kind of moral force that’s needed to confront the abuses and excesses of big-time sports. Foremost among

these moral problems would be the lingering racism evident, for example, in the paucity of black coaches in the college football ranks, and in the mounting pile of evidence of dramatically heightened rates of dementia among former pro football players. How can the good Christian men and women in and around sports be silent about these things? My hope is that sports-world Christianity begins to bring the whole gospel to bear on sports, rather than focusing on using or exploiting sports to market an evangelistic message.