

## *Let's Get Physical*



## *Spotlight on Teaching*

Frederick Glennon, Editor

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*Image: George Wilson, safety for the Buffalo Bills (American football), prays before a game against the New York Jets. By Ed Yourdon (Flickr: NY Jets vs. Buffalo, Oct 2009 - 02), via [Wikimedia Commons](#)*

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## Let's Get Physical: Using Sports, Yoga, and Dance to Teach about Religion

Fred Glennon, Le Moyne College

One of the most memorable research and writing projects in which I have been involved as a teacher-scholar of religion is a collection of essays on baseball and religion in American culture, entitled *The Faith of Fifty Million*. As a devoted Red Sox fan, who at times takes pilgrimages to the “sacred space” of Fenway Park, the opportunity to bring my field of research (religious ethics) and my love of baseball together was an opportunity too great to pass up. What baseball enthusiast wouldn't want to spend a week at the research library of the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York!

As a religious ethicist, I was particularly drawn to the “noble experiment” of Branch Rickey and Jackie Robinson to integrate major league baseball in post-WWII America (1947), an experiment that came before the civil rights movement and the historic *Brown v. the Board of Education* ruling of the United States Supreme Court (1954). As a researcher and teacher of religion and ethics, I was intrigued by the question of whether religion played any part in the integration of baseball. What my research unveiled was the clear religious underpinnings—the Methodism of Rickey and Robinson, the use of the Sermon on the Mount, and the connection with the Social Gospel—that enabled that experiment to succeed. I have used that book and that essay in a variety of ways to enable students to explore the interplay between sports, race, and religion in American culture. Moreover, it opened my eyes to the ways in which sports and other physical activities can be a useful way to engage undergraduate students to deepen their understanding of religion and ethics. As the authors of these essays attest, my experience is not unique. (Even the Vatican is exploring the positive potential of the interrelationship between religion and sports with their international conference on [Sport and Faith in the Service of Humanity](#).)

Arthur Remillard uses sports as a means to engage his students in understanding approaches to the study of religion. He notes how he had difficulty understanding Durkheim's connections between religion and society until, while living in Tallahassee, Florida, he saw them illustrated in the symbols and rituals Florida State football fans engaged in on game day. The notion of collective consciousness, the grand sense of “us” (over/against “them”), and the symbolic nature of sacred symbols embedded in athletics became clearer to him and offered a pathway to engage his students in the study of religion. Beginning with the collective consciousness of Durkheim and moving on to the work of Geertz, he begins with what students know, sports (whether as enthusiast or critic), and connects them to the various dimensions of religion. He does not see sport as a religion; rather, he enables his students to explore the ways in which sport operates in “characteristically religious ways.” Similar to the ways in which “athletes intuitively understand the relationship between body-bending repetition and mastery,” Remillard uses multiple teaching tactics—lectures, discussions, blogs, essays—to enable students to develop a deeper understanding of religious ideas and practices by the connections he and they make through their common experience of sports in American culture.

Philip Arnold also draws from his own biography and location to make connections between religion and sports. He teaches Native American and indigenous religions at Syracuse University (SU), a big time sports school. While best known for football and basketball, Arnold focuses his attention on lacrosse, in part because of SU's prowess in the sport, but mostly because of the sport's origins among the Haudenosaunee, one of the Native American groups he studies. A key focus for his course is the "gift exchange economy," which include both seen and unseen relationships and forces between the participants, and which he finds present in both sporting events and religious ceremonies. This is one way he enables students who have no background in the academic study of religion to see the correlations between the known, SU sports, and the unknown, the religious traditions he teaches. Through short papers and videos students post online (in a class that has had as many as 300), students explore the common themes between religion and sports, from the issues of identity to the questions of race, class, and environmental issues present in both sports and religion.

Annie Blazer explores American religious history in part through the lens of sports. Realizing that sports are a key aspect of American culture which resonates with her students, she uses particular case studies and texts to illustrate the ways in which American values and Protestant religious values cohere in an effort to problematize that close relationship. She speaks about the assimilation other religious groups, such as Catholics, Jews, and Muslims, experience through their appropriation of sports and the "muscular Christianity" part of the early rise of the relationship between religion and sports. As a result, her students are better able to understand and explore "intersectionality—the overlapping power structures that inform our society and world."

Similarly, Rebecca Alpert uses active learning strategies and case analyses to probe the manner in which, sometimes, religion and sports conflict. To challenge the supremacy of American football prevalent among many examples of the relationship between religion and sports, she chooses cases from a wide variety of geographic locations and sports. One case in particular is when a Muslim woman athlete wanted to compete while wearing the hijab—something American viewers of the 2016 Rio Olympics might have seen when Ibtihaj Muhammad became the first American woman to compete in the Olympics (fencing) wearing a hijab. She recreates the groups involved in the case and gets students to engage in various forms of perspective-taking. As a result, the case enables students to delve deeper into their own preconceived assumptions about Muslim women and veiling, thus opening the door for richer engagement, dialogue, and understanding.

Patton Burchett's essay does not directly focus on the relationship between religion and sports, but it does draw from the modern West's use of yoga primarily as a form of exercise, meditation, and well-being. In so doing, he connects students to the deeper religious and philosophical roots of various forms of yoga traditions and the meaning in construction of notions of identity and the self. While employing a variety of active learning strategies throughout the course, the key assignment he uses to achieve his ends is an essay where students bring the two theoretical frameworks of asceticism and Foucault's "practices of the self" to bear on the historical and contemporary expressions of yoga, enabling students to develop the skills necessary for processing and comparing new materials. The result is that students have a richer understanding of yoga "as techniques of body and mind which form and transform the self."

Katherine Zubko highlights another form of bodied physical activity, dance, to engage students in the study of religion, particularly Hinduism. During her own study of Hindu texts and languages she decided to return to dance as a form of stress relief. However, her experience in a dance practice that embodies the stories of Hindu gods led her to realize that her experience in dance was a form of "bodied" education which made the texts come alive and changed the way she viewed them. Wanting to enable

her students to experience the same (and to challenge the monotheistic lens through which many American students view other religions), Zubko chose to introduce dance as a kind of embodied learning and pedagogy. Not able to teach in a dance studio but in a traditional classroom, she led small groups of students in some mini exercises where students learned to embody the nine *rasas*, or emotional moods, through role-playing experiences in their own lives. By then coupling these experiences with the reading of a Hindu myth, this kind of embodied learning enabled her students to engage the study of Hinduism in a multidimensional way, the way religions are generally experienced by their adherents.

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## From Durkheim to Game Day: Sports as a Bridge for Introducing Religious Studies

Arthur Remillard, Saint Francis University

### Introduction

My initial reading of Émile Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* left me neither enlightened nor inspired, but rather profoundly confused. The principal barrier was my own limited understanding of the category of religion, which started and stopped with "a belief in God or gods." But slowly, the French sociologist's ideas on religion and society sunk in—that is, with a little help from college football.

I was living in Tallahassee at the time, home of the Florida State Seminoles. In shifting my gaze from Durkheim to game day, I witnessed a community of similarly dressed football devotees, unified in their ritual behaviors, and intensely loyal to their symbolic universe. From players and coaches to fans and the media, there was a grand sense of "us," not to mention a dehumanized "them" in the form of visiting teams. I discovered firsthand that critics could also become a "them." When I started asking impolite questions about the [Seminole mascot](#)—or "symbol," as they prefer to call it—I was met with an assortment of hostile responses. No doubt, I was treading on sacred territory.

As I learned more about the foundation and frontiers of religious studies, I simultaneously continued translating these ideas through the lens of athletics. To be clear, I *am not* partial to the "sport is a religion" trope. Such arguments, in my mind, stretch the categories of religion and sports to unrecognizable lengths. Instead, to channel David Chidester, I prefer to examine the ways in which sports operate in "characteristically religious ways." That is, I prefer to apply the tools of religious studies to athletic activities that participants and observers deem to be special, set apart. The Pittsburgh Steelers, for example, are not in my view *a religion* in western Pennsylvania. But I do notice a history of complex social forces producing an air of sacredness around the "[Terrible Towel](#)." One finds this ordinary piece of yellow cloth waved at games, hung in sports bars, wrapped around newborn infants, and rested atop the coffins of departed fans. For "Steelers Nation," this ordinary towel is an extraordinary marker of their corporate identity.

So from my earliest exposure to religious studies to the present, athletics has been part of my comprehension process. Drawing directly on this experience, my "Religion and Sports in America" class is also—in an almost surreptitious way—an introduction to the study of religion. First, I lure students in by promising to talk about sports. Then, before they know it, they're using terms like "collective effervescence" to describe sports fandom.



## Rammer, Jammer, Yellow Hammer!

On the first day of class, even before I introduce myself or the syllabus, I open with this question: “How does Émile Durkheim’s theory of religion apply to Warren St. John’s (2005) book, *Rammer Jammer Yellow Hammer*?”

I let the mystery hover in the air before explaining that we will be spending the next three weeks pursuing this question, which is also the prompt for their first essay. Durkheim, I tell them, broke new ground in his time by giving a social explanation for the phenomenon of religion. St. John, meanwhile, is a contemporary author and journalist who followed the Alabama Crimson Tide football team for a season. Students are, to say the least, unimpressed with Durkheim. But the promise of *Rammer Jammer* keeps them from rushing out to drop the class.

Week one focuses on the first half of this question, as we read and discuss Daniel Pals’s (2015) remarkably lucid summary of Durkheim in *Nine Theories of Religion*. I have considered assigning segments from *Elementary Forms*, but I worry that the lumpy prose and abstruse references will frustrate students. Additionally, nearly everyone taking my course is not a religious studies major. Instead, they are enrolled to fulfill a general education credit. Pals offers a relatively painless point of entry for this population.

In the second week, we move on to *Rammer Jammer Yellow Hammer*, a title that derives from a popular cheer associated with the Alabama football team. St. John is an Alabama native who was educated at Columbia before becoming a noted journalist. He begins the book by laying bare his irrational passion for the Tide, admitting that there is no good reason for him to be obsessed by the doings of these anonymous young men and their coaches. And yet, wins and losses become a matter of life or death, leading St. John to wonder, “Why do I care?”

To pursue this question, the author purchases a rickety and fuel-inefficient RV and follows the team during its 1999 campaign. While documenting the eccentric followers of “Bama Nation,” he also ponders the visible and invisible contours of this community. In one notable passage, he recounts celebrating with fellow RVers after a win over the University of Florida. Jubilation turned sour when the gathering learned that one of Alabama’s African American players might have committed an NCAA violation that could lead to a forfeiture of wins. Suddenly, fans who were previously overflowing with praise for the players deployed the vilest racial slurs. A horrified St. John then reflected that shouting “Roll Tide” and celebrating a victory might give him a comforting feeling of “us.” But the presence of racism left him saddened and bewildered, “struggling to understand who exactly ‘we’ are.”

Passages like these make *Rammer Jammer* fertile ground for Durkheimian analysis. But I have found that the connections between these two are not as self-evident as I think they are. Fan mania might be something that all or most of my students can relate with. But Durkheim? Not so much. Bridging this gap means offering multiple entry points for students to think through their assignment long before they begin writing.

### “The Relentless Work to Bend the Body to Necessary Habits”

“The most frequent mode of exercising intelligence...is repetition,” writes philosopher Jacques Rancière. A new task, skill, or theory might be seen or experienced in its initial stages. But to have ownership of any new idea requires doing something over and over again, even when it’s boring and monotonous. As Rancière observes, the “secret” of those who we call “geniuses” is “the relentless work to bend the body

to necessary habits.”

Most athletes intuitively understand the relationship between body-bending repetition and mastery. Throwing a football, swinging a golf club, or running a fast mile takes practice. And for practice to be effective, the athlete must be invested in the task, he or she must act with deep intention. Repetition is similarly necessary for classroom learning. I can say something in a lecture, or assign a reading. But if this idea is new and complicated, it will take time and effort to digest. With that in mind, I offer many ways for students to think through Durkheim and Alabama football.

I begin by lecturing on Durkheim. While I use quizzes to keep students accountable for reading, I find that they profit from both reading and hearing about the theorist. From there, we move on to St. John’s memoir. Masterfully written and entertaining throughout, I trust that students will have little difficulty discussing the story. In the past, I have led discussions on the book, trying to direct conversations back to Durkheim whenever possible. But recently, I have experimented with allowing students to lead discussions. To do this, students are assigned to groups that will direct discussions on a given day. They are assessed on three criteria: 1) covering the assigned reading; 2) attempting to connect the reading to Durkheim; and 3) reflecting on what was most interesting and unique to them. I assess participants on roughly the same standards. While they might not “get” Durkheim immediately, giving it an honest effort does seem to help.

I also require students to write a blog post before coming to class. For this, I simply ask them to comment on something of interest to them that came out of the reading. This helps the discussion leaders pick up on issues that can be used during class.

Finally, after two weeks of lecture and discussion, we move on to writing the essay. Students first submit a draft, which awards a minimal number of points based on word limit, timeliness, and appearance of effort. Then during our class meeting, students are asked to step to the board and sketch out an outline of their paper. All of us then offer suggestions for improvement, before students submit their final draft.

From the first lecture to the final paper, I give ample opportunities to engage and reengage with Durkheim and *Rammer Jammer*. Moreover, there is a deliberate effort to create an atmosphere of collaboration, where students work together in different settings. The rest of this course repeats this structure. We apply Mircea Eliade to Stephen Amidon’s (2012) *Something Like the Gods*; Karl Marx to Anna Krien’s (2014) *Night Games*; and Clifford Geertz to Christopher McDougall’s (2011) *Born to Run*. As we go, there are opportunities to compare and contrast the different theorists and books. Then the final project has students applying the theoretical perspectives of the course to a sports item of their choosing.

While the course structure is repetitive, I have found that its varied modes of delivery help to avoid stagnation. By the time students are tired of my lectures, we move on to discussions. And when everyone has stated his or her thoughts on the books, we move on to papers. And once that is finished, we start all over again with something new. In other words, we move from assignment to assignment just like our favorite teams go from one game to the next, hoping to improve with each outing.

### **Bridging the Gap**

As I continue to offer the course, I am also ceaselessly adjusting my syllabus. The book list as it stands could do a better job of including female athletes, as well as minority experiences. I am also open to making use of more contemporary religion theorists. I employ the “classics” because I want students to

deal with the foundational ideas in religious studies. But if I found the right contemporary readings, I could be convinced to include some “new classics.”

As for everything else, I am intrigued by bringing student-led discussions into this course. I piloted this technique in another class that I teach on apocalyptic literature and film. This is a “capstone” course for our general education program. While we have license to choose the topic and material, we are also instructed to maximize participation and minimize lecturing. My only problem with this is that I have *never* been good at leading discussions. Questions that I find provocative meet with empty stares and the deafening sound of crickets chirping. So I decided to let my students lead the conversations. To be sure, there were meandering tangents and superficial observations. And I found it unnerving to cede control in the classroom, a potential threat to my authority. But the overall experience was positive for me and my students. And by grading discussions each week, the regular feedback helped students to become better discussion leaders and participants. Active citizenship at work, I suppose.

Ongoing adjustments and revisions notwithstanding, I have come to value this course and what it can do for introducing my discipline to unsuspecting students. In Wilbert J. McKeachie and Marilla Svinicki’s *Teaching Tips*, the authors stress that the effective professor develops learning strategies “that help students to build bridges between what they already know or have experienced and what they are trying to learn” (2011, 297). In other words, intellectual transformation happens when students can start from a familiar spot, and migrate to someplace new. But finding common ground with our students is, to say the least, challenging. Television, film, the Internet, and current events exist in a vast and fragmented media landscape. Sports, though, remain something of a shared text. After all, even the hardened sports skeptic can’t escape the ubiquity of Super Bowl Sunday or the Summer Olympics.

Indeed, in this course, we begin in the land of long passes, strikeouts, and endless volleys, and travel to a territory of peculiar rites, hierophanies, and thick descriptions. Along the way, we have the opportunity to think anew about religion, sports, and the complicated ways that these human institutions interact.

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## Religion and Sports

Philip P. Arnold, Syracuse University

### Background and Theory

In 2005 I developed the class Religion and Sports at Syracuse University (SU). Combining face-to-face traditional classroom and online versions of the course this year, I will teach close to 550 students in this class alone, making it not only the most sought-after course in our department, but also one of the most popular electives at SU. This is not to boast but to use this example as an appeal to faculty of religion to make our subjects more integral to the lives of our students.

Like many universities, SU is known as a big sports school. Although basketball and football are most well-loved, as they are here and elsewhere, it is lacrosse that inspired the creation of this class. SU is well known in the lacrosse world for having won 11 NCAA National Championships. As with Baltimore, Long Island, and Boston, Central New York is also known as a hotbed of lacrosse. Unlike those places, which are associated with prep schools or the Ivy League, SU lacrosse is associated with the Haudenosaunee (aka, the Iroquois—a derogatory reference assigned by 17<sup>th</sup> century Jesuits), about who I teach in the area of Native American and Indigenous religions. The Religion and Sports class enables me to help students better relate to issues in Native American studies and religious studies through something they love—sports at SU. After 20 years of teaching, I in turn have become a dedicated “orange” fan, which is something I share with my students.

In addition to a professional interest in lacrosse, my college-age twin sons (citizens of the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin) have been playing competitive box lacrosse for the Onondaga Nation Redhawks since they were three years old. The Onondaga Nation is the “Central Fire” of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy—the home of Iroquois Nationals Lacrosse and where Haudenosaunee passports are issued to all their citizens. My wife, Sandy Bigtree, is a Mohawk Nation citizen at Akwesasne, but she grew up here in Syracuse. In addition to teaching, I am also director of an academic collaborative with the Onondaga Nation leadership, who created [Skä·noñh—the Great Law of Peace Center](#). Pedagogically, therefore, my way of teaching sports is deeply connected with local traditions of the Onondaga Nation and the Haudenosaunee, the SU sporting legacy, and a personal family history. So this class introduces students to theories and methods in the academic study of religion, using the history of religions framework, with emphasis on the work of Mircea Eliade, Charles H. Long, and Marcel Mauss, as an interpretive method to approach Native American/Indigenous Studies.

### Teaching Strategy

In 2012 I published a book taken from the lectures of my class Religion and Sports. It is titled *The Gift of Sports: Indigenous Ceremonial Dimensions of the Games We Love*, which now serves as the textbook for

the class. The class is organized into separate topics for each week. Every other week, students post a short paper on a specific topic and are then required to respond to each other's writing. In total, there are seven short papers posted on Blackboard. In recent years, students have opted to submit short videos for their final projects. Their task is to apply concepts of the class to some sporting phenomenon (an athlete, event, or venue). Videos are the medium that students most closely associate with sports and, contrary to my initial trepidation, their video submissions have turned out surprisingly well.

Because this class attracts students with no previous background in the academic study of religion, I have to start with basic information. For the first paper we talk about identity issues (what does it mean to be "Orange," or an SU sports fan) and the differences between using sports to promote a specific religion (initially, Tim Tebow's praying on the football sidelines is the favorite choice) and the more deeply embedded religious dimensions of sports. It is generally difficult for students to appreciate this reorientation of "sports as religion." Initially, we talk about the ambiguity of religion by looking at different definitions, and I ask them to apply these various ways of looking at religion to redefine their relationship to sports.

In the second paper we are introduced to the central themes of the class: sports (and religion) as gift exchanges economy. Using examples from Indigenous ceremonial traditions, students address what exchanges are happening in sporting events between and among gifted athletes, fans, officials, coaches, and sports venues. Analogous to religious ceremonies, sports can be seen as a series of exchanges between seen and unseen forces. This "gift economy" is surrounded by a very powerful monetary economy that indicates the relative value of a sport (men's basketball over women's basketball, for example). At the same time, however, the monetary economy cannot interfere on the field, so to speak, with the purely gift economy between athletes. That is called cheating. Students assemble a glossary of terms in order to use these ideas and concepts when thinking about the religious dimensions of sports.

The remaining papers for the class deal with an array of topics including the gifted coach (or the philosopher coach of ancient Greece); the ancient and modern Olympics; racism, sexism, and environmental issues in sports; the Native American origins of American football; and finally the Haudenosaunee and lacrosse. With each paper I ask students to react to each other's writing by submitting comments on Blackboard. There are two extra-credit opportunities on the Superbowl and male identity in sports. In spite of the traditional face-to-face version of this class, which has reached about 300, we get to schedule a couple of "field trips" to SU's Carrier Dome. Last spring, we heard Oren Lyons, an esteemed alumnus from the Onondaga Nation; and had a visit from a world-renowned wooden lacrosse stick maker from the Onondaga Nation, Alf Jacques. In past years we have also heard from the famous emeritus coach Roy Simmons, Jr., and the great Floyd Little.

## **Conclusions**

There are numerous religion and sports classes being developed around the world. This area is a growing edge of religious studies, and there is no single set criteria for teaching these classes. My strategy is to utilize something obvious in the student's life that they love and regard so highly, so they can think more critically about the religious dimensions of their everyday lives. When speaking about sports, they often refer to religious categories without really appreciating that fact. Discussing games when something remarkable occurs, a manifestation of some unique athletic ability that is unseen until revealed in the event, is akin to what we might call the "hierophany." Sports is an obvious vehicle for talking about a hidden world that can be revealed in a wondrous moment. Sports is also where the most egregious acts of greedy behavior can also be seen by all. Doping scandals, sexual abuse scandals, examples of domestic violence perpetrated by athletes, illegal money transactions, NCAA corruption,

cheating, racist and sexist chants by fans and players. One can also be highly critical of sports traditions too (as with Native American mascots) in an open and competitive way, making it a perfect medium to talk about the controversial nature of religion. These are all examples of the violations which keep us from fully experiencing the gift of sports.

I think these classes are successful to the degree to which they can utilize local, regional, and national sporting traditions. This is one reason why I have used Indigenous ceremonial traditions in this area, as a way of appreciating the student's commitments at this place called Syracuse. I couldn't teach this class, as it is currently conceived, at another school location. Sports is fiercely local and this class has to draw on that energy. When students can see gift and monetary economies in contrasting situations, this will help them to more clearly understand both sports and religion.



## Using Sport to Teaching American Religious History

Annie Blazer, College of William and Mary

### Introduction

I began studying the relationship between religion and sports in the United States as a graduate student because I was interested in investigating the religious underpinnings and implications of popular culture. As I dug into the literature on religion and sports and conducted my own research on contemporary Christian athletes, I noticed an interesting historical trend: since at least the late 19th century, religious Americans have turned to sport to strengthen both the *American* and the *religious* aspects of their identity; and their practices and descriptions can reveal cultural understandings of what it means to be religious and what it means to be American—two important topics for courses on religion in America. Over the past several years of teaching about religion in the United States, I have found that including a unit on religion and sports provides an accessible and exciting way to engage students on questions of identity, community, and American culture.

A central theme of my courses, and of many courses on religion in the United States, is the establishment and maintenance of Protestant dominance in American life. Scholars have noted that the American legal system uses a Protestant Christian prototype to define religion, inherently privileging forms of religion that adhere to Protestant norms (private, voluntary, individual, textual, and believed) over others (that may be public, coercive, communal, oral, or enacted). This privileging becomes clear when we compare Protestant and non-Protestant religious groups and examine how non-Protestant religions adapt to American culture. Catherine Albanese's popular textbook on religion in America, *America: Religions and Religion* (2012), calls this the "manyness" and the "oneness" of American religions. While the United States has consistently demonstrated religious diversity, both through innovation and immigration, its religiosity also tends to adhere to Protestant definitions of what counts as "religious." For example, non-Protestant religious immigrants to the United States tend to adopt a congregational model of religious practice regardless of whether this was their practice in their previous home. As scholars and teachers of religion in America have emphasized, paying attention to the privileging of Protestantism is crucial for examining lived religion in the United States. There are, of course, many means of achieving this goal. This article makes a case for using the history of US sports to provide students with an accessible example of how Protestants exerted and maintained cultural dominance.

### Sports History is Religious History

Let me tell you the story I tell my students. Sports and religion did not always go hand in hand in the United States. Today, it is common to see Christian athletes thanking God in post-game interviews or for American children to attend Christian summer camps that focus on athletic training; but for much of US

history, Christians were skeptical of sports' benefits and deeply suspicious that playing sports ran counter to Christian values. Christians in the 18th and early 19th centuries saw sport as a dangerous leisure activity likely to distract Christians from church and tempt them with vices like gambling, alcohol, womanizing, and violence. Many states passed laws banning the playing of sports on Sundays, demonstrating the idea that sport contradicted and perhaps undermined Christian priorities. So, what changed? How did the United States move from a stance of seeing religion and sport as contradictory to a stance of seeing religion and sport as compatible, perhaps even mutually beneficial?

One answer to this question is the social movement of muscular Christianity, a turn-of-the-century Protestant movement that emphasized a Christian commitment to health and manliness. Muscular Christians developed institutions like the YMCA and Boy Scouts of America; they invented the sport of basketball; and they were extremely influential in the normalization of physical education in schools and summer camp curricula. When teaching about muscular Christianity, I emphasize the social context of the movement—a time of rapid industrialization, urbanization, and immigration—in order to show American Protestant anxiety over their increasingly fragile position of cultural dominance. These Protestants turned to sport as an affirmation of masculinity and power. I ask the students to think about how the legacies of muscular Christianity (physical education, the idea that “sport builds character,” and the affirmation of masculinity) shift from being “Protestant values” to “American values.” I have had much success having students discuss their own summer camp or team sport experiences from a critical perspective as they begin to question who benefits from the institutionalized disciplinarity of sports participation?

Once I have covered muscular Christianity, I introduce the students to the largest religious immigrant groups who were arriving in the United States at the time—Jews and Catholics. We discuss how many Jews and Catholics embraced sports in order to demonstrate (to the dominant Protestant establishment) that they were capable of becoming fully American. For example, Jews developed institutions such as the Young Men's Hebrew Association modeled on muscular Christianity's YMCA. Through these activities, American Jews sought to negotiate between preserving their values of intellectualism and community while concurrently engaging in the embodied and often individualistic project of sports. We also discuss anti-Semitism and look at the Black Sox Scandal of 1919. Prominent Americans like Henry Ford blamed the Jewish gamblers who organized the thrown World Series more than the players who participated in it, and Ford publicly argued that Jews were ruining America by undermining America's pastime of baseball. I connect this sentiment of anti-Semitism to the change of immigration laws in 1924 that severely limited Jewish and Catholic immigration. Much of this history is new territory for my students and thinking about anti-Catholic and anti-Semitic discrimination through the lens of sports helps to ground them in this history.

In much the same way that American Jews turned to sports to demonstrate their belonging in America, the Catholic diocese of Philadelphia was especially keen on sports programming. I assign Julie Byrne's (2003) work, *O God of Players: The Story of the Immaculata Mighty Macs*, as a case study to show how Catholics embraced the ideals of muscular Christianity and modified these ideals for women. Shifting our attention to address explicitly women in sport complicates the narrative of masculinity as a source of power. For Catholic women like those on the Mighty Macs, playing sports required emphasizing and over-emphasizing femininity in order to show that playing sport could be appropriate for women. I return here to the muscular Christian idea of sport as a way to “turn boys into men”—women had to negotiate sport very carefully to combat the underlying logic that sport would turn girls into men.

I conclude the unit on sports with two examples of sport and Islam in the United States. Using Muhammad Ali's conversion to Nation of Islam and his refusal to fight in Vietnam, I cover themes of religious resistance, politicized religion, and religion and race. While most of my students are familiar with Muhammad Ali as a Parkinson's sufferer and a famous boxer, they are often unaware of his affiliation with a radical separatist religious movement and his plea for conscientious objector status. Pairing Muhammad Ali's story with Julie Byrne's work allows us to discuss the role of religion and sports in what Byrne calls the pleasure of standing out and the pleasure of fitting in. Like the Immaculata Mighty Macs, Muhammad Ali saw himself as a public role model for his religion and experienced conflicting pressures to fit into his religious community and to fit into American culture. The controversy surrounding his draft evasion brings these issues to the fore.

As a second example, I have the students watch a documentary about a majority Muslim high school football team in Dearborn, Michigan called *Fordson: Faith, Fasting, and the American Dream* (2011). The documentary follows the team during the month of Ramadan and raises questions about assimilation, religious community, and what it means to be American. This documentary allows me to return to many of the themes that emerged when we talked about Jewish immigrants' embrace of muscular Christian practices, and the students are able to see that muscular Christian values (i.e., Protestant norms) are still incredibly influential in the contemporary United States.

### **Sport as a Cultural Lens**

In my teaching, sport has been useful for connecting my students to major trends in American religious history. Because many students have had experiences with sports, they can better humanize this range of religious traditions. Like the study of religion, the study of sport can be a fruitful place to illuminate and investigate intersectionality—the overlapping power structures that inform our society and world. Sport is certainly not the only slice of culture that can raise these issues and provoke these conversations, but what I have found especially helpful about sport is that, for many students, sport is a part of their lives and culture that they treat as normal, natural, and static. Spending some time thinking about sport as cultural work in progress, fraught with power struggles, and examining how dominant and minority groups have contributed to our now black-boxed understanding of sport as “character-building” teaches students to ask really important questions: what are we taking for granted? What goes without saying? What are the effects of this unquestioned knowledge? Who benefits and who struggles?

At the end of the course, I want to students to understand that many of what they commonly think of as “American values” have roots in Protestantism, and therefore these “American values” privilege certain ways of being religious over others. Using sports to explore the American religious landscape engages students in thinking through an aspect of American culture that they often take for granted, and I have had much success in using sport to help students see the influence of Protestantism on American cultural norms and values.

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## Using Case Studies to Teach Religion and Sports

Rebecca T. Alpert, Temple University

### Introduction

When teaching Religion and Sports, I use case studies to give students the experience of approaching the subject through an academic lens of analysis with an emphasis on active learning. To challenge the centrality of American football in religion and sport, I choose cases from a wide variety of religious traditions, geographic locations, and sports. They are all drawn from real events and conflicts.

A case from the 2012 Olympics illustrates the value of this strategy. It's the story of Wojdan Ali Seraj Abdulrahim Shahrkhani, the Saudi judoka who was the first woman from that country to compete in the Olympics. Her religious commitments required that she compete wearing hijab; something that the International Judo Federation had never contemplated. Through this case we examine the connections between Islamic values of modesty and gender segregation as they apply to women's participation in Olympic sports.

### Teaching Strategy

I ask the students to come prepared to discuss the case. I assign a case study I wrote, "Judo and Hijab at the Olympics" (Alpert 2015, 134–139). I also ask them to do some background reading about Muslim women's active participation in sports using Benn, Tansin, G. Pfister and H. Jawad, eds. (2011) *Muslim Women and Sport*. They are also required to watch the film *Offside* (directed by Jafar Panahi, 2006) to look at one example of the conflict between women's full participation and gender segregation in more traditional Muslim societies (in this case, Iran). There are several websites they need to consult for background as well: the [International Judo Federation Sports and Organizational Rules](#) (91–113), [Capsters](#), and stories and videos of the match itself.

The class begins with a discussion of the various dimensions of the conflict over this case. The goal is to make sure students understand the viewpoints of the various stakeholders. Having women from Saudi Arabia participate in the 2012 Olympics was important to the International Olympic Committee, which had been encouraging every country to send women athletes to compete. As the last country to comply, this participation also mattered to the Saudi Olympic Committee. That committee had to balance their international concern with internal Saudi politics on gender, requiring both proper dress (hijab) and segregation for women in public spaces. The International Judo Federation had a very different agenda concerning their rules about appropriate attire for judokas to ensure their safety and guard against an unfair advantage.

Following the discussion, the students recreate the decision-making process that allowed Shahrkhani to enter the Olympic judo match in hijab. Here is the agenda I used for the activity:

Step 1. Each student will be assigned a role. All students assigned this role will meet together and prepare your strategies.

Role #1: Shahrkhani. It will be your task to explain why you want to participate in the Olympics and what you will need to make it possible for you to do so.

Roles #2–4: Representatives of the International Judo Federation (IJF), International Olympic Committee (IOC), and the Saudi Olympic Committee (SOC). You will formulate your position on Shahrkhani's participation. Be ready to explain your reasons for taking the position.

Role #5: Moderator. You will strategize tactics for organizing the conversation among the participants and creating a decision-making process.

Step 2. Once you have formulated your positions, you will meet in groups in your various roles to present your perspective and come to a decision.

Step 3. Finally the class will debrief. Did your group come to the same compromise that permitted Shahrkhani to play in an improvised head covering? Were there other solutions that arose? What was the greatest obstacle in reaching a decision?

Students have a variety of reactions to this exercise. Most are surprised that the International Judo Federation rule book is as strict and uncompromising as religious law. They are also quite impressed at the variety of possibilities for women in Saudi Arabian culture, and they have an opportunity to challenge their preconceptions about veiling and gender relations in Islam. I have only used this exercise a few times, but so far the students haven't come up with better solutions. They are almost universally in favor of the compromise.

## Conclusion

This kind of active learning strategy enables students to put new concepts into practice. Presenting a position helps them clarify their understanding of such conflicts. They see that there are other legitimate positions that may not comport with their own world view. This type of activity also helps them realize that they can change their minds. In this specific case, I have found that learning about this conflict gives students an opening to examine their preconceptions about Muslim women and veiling, which they often see as oppressive rather than as a woman's chosen religious commitment. This kind of group experience helps develop students' curiosity, allows them to reformulate concepts from their readings in their own words, and gives them opportunities to explore new perspectives.

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## Yoga in Theory and Practice: Pedagogical Strategies

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### Introduction

Each year I teach a course entitled Yoga and Tantra that traces the historical developments of traditions of Yoga and Hindu Tantra in South Asia while also looking at modern understandings and practices of Yoga and Tantra in the West. In the class, we examine contemporary debates surrounding modern-day conceptions of Yoga and Tantra, while also investigating the origins of these traditions and how they came to be thought of and practiced in the way they are today. In this article I want to focus specifically on a pedagogical strategy I have found useful in teaching students about the diverse historical tradition of yoga.

When approaching a subject as broad—and a word with as many different connotations—as *yoga*, it is rather difficult to find a single conceptual framework capable of uniting, and productively considering under its umbrella, the great variety of practices that have been called “yoga” (practices as radically different as the meditation-based yoga of the *Upanishads* and Patanjali, the subtle-body focused practices of tantric yoga, and the modern day postures of Bikram, Iyengar, and Pattabhis Jois). After some trial and error in how to think about these extremely different phenomena within one frame, I came upon two very productive theoretical frames: (1) asceticism, broadly construed, and (2) Michel Foucault’s “technologies of the self.” In order to teach students these concepts—which will allow them to understand all forms of yoga as a certain type of response to and expression of the human condition—while also stressing the unique features and perspectives of different historical forms of yoga, I give an essay assignment. While in other portions of my class, I use active learning techniques and conduct elaborate class debates, this particular assignment is more traditional. In certain respects it is quite conventional—hardly “cutting edge” pedagogy—but it works very well and accomplishes something very important; thus, it is well worth telling you about it.

### A Conceptual Frame for Yoga across Time

In the first two weeks of my class, students trace the early history of yoga via its textual record by reading primary source selections from the *Upanishads*, the *Mahābhārata* (including the *Bhagavad Gita*), and Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra*. Once they have this background regarding what early Indian yoga is, we read and discuss the following theoretical pieces: Richard Valantasis’s “A Theory of the Social Function of Asceticism”; the introduction of Gavin Flood’s *The Ascetic Self*; excerpts of Marcel Mauss’s “Techniques of the Body”; and excerpts of Michel Foucault’s “Technologies of the Self” and “On the Genealogy of Ethics.” Through these pieces, I present “asceticism” as physical and mental activities that form and transform the self, especially through performance, intentionality, and ritualized techniques of the body and mind. I encourage students to see asceticism operating at the concrete level of behavior:

abstract, intangible concepts, values, and goals become purposeful behavioral patterns in and through asceticism. The performance of disciplined intention interiorizes and naturalizes certain types of behavior and emotion.

In class we discuss the core ideas in these theoretical pieces *and* how they might apply to yoga—whether ancient (which they’ve just gained some familiarity with) or modern (which they already have some level of familiarity with). The students are then given an essay assignment in which they’re asked to use the conceptual framework of Foucault’s “practices of the self”—as well as the theoretical frameworks offered by Valantasis and Flood regarding “asceticism”—to discuss how yoga and yoga practice are conceived in two of the following three primary sources: the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the *Yoga Sutra*. The assignment asks them to consider these questions:

Specifically, what “operations” do these texts advocate one to perform upon oneself? (And specifically what aspect(s) of one’s ordinary “self” are targeted or acted upon?) What sort of transformation is sought and through what means? What is the end goal and what is the larger context of assumed ideas and worldviews within which that end goal makes sense? Do the two source texts you have chosen articulate different conceptions of the practice and goals of yoga? (If yes, then how so?)

Allow me to turn now to the logic for this assignment.

### **Applying Theory, Comparing Yogas**

In his *On Teaching Religion*, Jonathon Z. Smith (2013) writes that he wants his students to know “that matters are always more complex than they first appear, and that this is liberating rather than paralyzing” (3). He makes a list of “rules” in the service of this end, two of which are directly applicable to the pedagogical strategy and assignment I am discussing. Smith states: “Nothing must stand alone. Comparison opens space for criticism.” He follows this by stating, “A student only knows something well if she can apply it to something else” (3). *Comparison* and *application* are at the heart of this assignment’s design.

I conceive the essay assignment I give my students as—to paraphrase John Bean—an opportunity both to *do* critical thinking and to produce a product communicating the results of that critical thinking. For many students, it is no easy task to translate abstract theoretical ideas to specific material. In this assignment, they come to see not only how “theory” can illuminate specific material “in practice,” but also they often find that the theoretical ideas do not fully make sense to them until they have used those ideas (a) to interpret the primary sources *and* (b) to serve as the basis for a comparison of those sources’ specific teachings on yoga. In other words, it is in the combination of *application* (of theoretical concepts to interpret and explain specific material) and analytic *comparison* (of the primary source teachings on yoga) that this assignment demands that it functions as an especially effective pedagogical tool.

### **From the Ancient to the Modern: New Applications**

It seems to me that one mark of a good, pedagogically effective assignment, particularly one given early on in a course, is that it teaches ideas and skills that students will continue to draw upon and that can provide frameworks for processing and comparing new material in the course. This is certainly the aim of the essay assignment I have been describing. As we proceed in the course into different historical forms of yoga, from medieval to early modern South Asia, and then to the modern West, we continually

return in class to the theoretical conceptualizations of “asceticism” and “technologies of the self” at the heart of the assignment I have been describing. Particularly when we get to the end of the course, to readings on and discussions of modern forms of postural yoga, students have found these frameworks invaluable for placing these contemporary styles of yoga—such as Bikram, Iyengar, and Pattabhis Jois’s Ashtanga Yoga—alongside traditional ancient and medieval South Asian forms of yoga and considering them all as techniques of body and mind which form and transform the self; i.e., mental and physical methods for constructing and performing a particular kind of self.

Students usually enter the course with very particular ideas of what yoga is. They also typically enter with very particular ideas about their selves; that is, notions about what “the self” is and, thus, who they are at their core. In the essay assignment that I give early on, and throughout the course, I give students theoretical frames for understanding the constructed nature of selfhood and ask them to apply these frames in comparing and contrasting different historical forms of yoga. In regularly returning to these frames and applying them to specific types of yoga in different time periods and social contexts, students learn—gradually and incrementally—to identify the assumptions embedded in different cultural and historical worldviews and to reflect on how these assumptions (about the nature and relationships of the human being, the natural world, and the Divine) lead to particular visions *of* and goals *for* “the self,” and thus to certain disciplined, deliberate patternings of behavior designed to realize those visions and goals. When, at the end of the course, we arrive at the yoga practices of contemporary American society, the students are in a position to successfully deconstruct the assumptions of our own culture and to see how contemporary forms of yoga work toward enacting historically specific notions of the self and the “good life.”

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## Sensing the Gods: Utilizing Embodied Pedagogy to Understand Hindu Devotion

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### Embodied Knowledge and Academic Institutions

Teaching about Hinduism in North American contexts raises particular challenges, especially in classrooms with students who view concepts of religion through predominantly Christian categories. As Narayanan (2000) and Bauman and Saunders (2009) discuss, two of these challenges include the privileging of text/scripture over embodied ritual and presuming a monotheistic framework that resists a multiplicity of gods and the corresponding variety of devotional relationships, some of which are viewed as uncomfortably intimate. Our own academic training often perpetuates these assumptions about what counts as religion, informing not only our research methods but also approaches to teaching.

For example, when I was just beginning my own study of Hindu traditions at the graduate level, I was advised to enroll in Sanskrit language courses and to read Hindu philosophy, especially texts like the *Bhagavad Gita* that present Krishna as refracted through a monotheistic lens. At the same time, I sought out a dance teacher in the wider community and began classes in *bharata natyam*, a dance form that traditionally embodies the stories of Hindu gods. Deciding to dance again after leaving behind intensive ballet training in my late teens, I originally saw it as a stress-relieving complementary activity that would get me up on my feet and away from my constant companion, the Monier Williams Sanskrit dictionary. However, the stories we began to learn in dance class quickly began to raise questions: Who was this Krishna that stole the clothing of the milkmaids? Why was Krishna's beloved Radha angry at him? And where was the Krishna of the *Bhagavad Gita*—the cool-headed charioteer advisor—who did not seem to be featured in these dances, but instead showed himself to be a lovesick flute player, trapped by the bow and arrow of Radha's arched eyebrow and darting glances?

Dance class became a bodied education that changed how I read the texts back in the academic seminars on Hinduism, especially when we did immerse ourselves in the wider array of mythologies and explored the concept of *bhakti*, or devotional relational models between gods and practitioners. From then on, I valued what my bodied knowledge could help me to understand—in particular, the spectrum of emotional nuances that both devotees *and* gods experience as part of evolving *bhakti* relationships. Enlisting my own bodied insights became a central part of my research methodology in graduate school and beyond, but it also would become a central part of my pedagogical toolbox.

When the opportunity arose to teach a class of my own that would include embodied learning, it was during my first year at a public liberal arts college with a brand new religious studies department. While I had freedom to develop curriculum in new directions, including the proposed course titled Religion and Dance in South Asia, I had limited access to dance studio space as it was under the purview of campus

recreation despite having a dance minor. The idea of needing multiple spaces for a class was also novel and raised resource questions that, without an established network of institutional contacts, I had no way of knowing how to navigate at first.

At the time I did not realize how unusual a request this was. My previous experience with hybrid religious studies courses at Emory University appeared to be institutionally seamless. In particular, I had been the teaching assistant of a course on religion and embodied knowledge that involved an embedded weekly studio practicum in the Indian dance form of Kuchipudi, and that was a model I hoped to import into my new teaching context. This original course has now been taught several times at Emory and has been transplanted to other institutions (see Flueckiger and Kamath 2009).

If I wanted to get students into their bodies for the first iteration of the class at my university, it looked like I would have to adapt around the furniture. I decided to develop several mini-exercises that could be done in a typical classroom setting to expand on or even introduce particular concepts that are central to Hindu traditions. As a course that also fulfilled a general education arts requirement, I intended these small kinesthetic incursions to be inviting to a larger portion of the student population with (who had) mixed levels of engagement with bodied ways of knowing. In what ways can we utilize bodied knowledge as part of the learning process, as appropriate to our own disciplinary, institutional, and classroom contexts?

### **Embodying *Rasas* to Read Hindu Myths**

The following mini-exercise facilitates accessing embodied knowledge to help students “think through” relationships between text and practice, and it enlists their own sensory experiences to understand the spectrum of emotional responses that create close devotional relationships with Hindu gods. I employed the strategy as part of a unit on myth and Hindu devotion in which a typical approach might be to read a series of selected myths and analyze visual images of the Hindu gods. What is often missed is the ability of students to make the leap to imagine how people respond to these gods and their actions. The pedagogical purpose of the exercise is to help bridge this gap through enlisting the sensory knowledge of the students in order to experience how devotion is cultivated through creating interactive, affective relationships.

A grounding principle of South Asian aesthetics is the concept of the nine *rasas*, or emotional moods ideally experienced by a person experiencing a work of art, whether a poem, painting, sculpture, or performance. While those in theater and performance studies have developed more elaborate studio exercises utilizing *rasa* (Schechner 2001), for my pedagogical purposes, I provide students with a simplified introduction to these universally recognizable nine *rasas*: love, anger, humor, disgust, wonder, compassion, heroism, fear, and tranquility. I then assign a *rasa* to groups of two to three students and have them imagine an everyday scenario in which the emotion may be play-acted (e.g., biting into a rotten apple and corresponding facial response for “disgust”). Groups examine and record what the different parts of the body do in response to enacting “disgust,” such as squinting of eyes, puckering of lips, furrowing of brow, and holding the apple at a distance with their torso leaning away, and so on. A few groups volunteer to show the results of their role-play and corresponding observations.

The next step is to then give the group a Hindu myth to read and have them identify different possible *rasas* that would be involved in performing the story. For example, the *Ramayana* story of Shabari biting into each piece of fruit before offering only the sweetest to the god Rama might involve disgust on the part of Shabari who at first bites into rottenness, as well as the disgust, or shame, of observers who see the offerings that should remain untouched and pure for the gods being sullied. Students who only read

the story often are puzzled as to why it would matter that Shabari samples the fruit first, and if it was such a violation, why Rama would accept the half-eaten fruit. By experiencing the mechanisms of disgust within the embodied aesthetic framework of *rasa*, students make more sophisticated observations about Shabari as a devotee who intentionally takes on the possibility of encountering sour or bitter in order to locate the sweetest offering, purposefully dismissing societal conventions (a typical rhetoric at the heart of *bhakti*), and creating an intimacy of shared food often reserved for close family members or lovers. Rama also becomes a god who invites affection in compassionate, in sometimes unorthodox ways, and is not bound in his choices by rigid purity systems. Being able to recognize these aspects of affection, as grounded in their own bodied knowledge, opens up a multidimensional understanding of *bhakti*.

Each of the *rasas* can be examined for how they create different types of closeness, affection, and divine intervention as part of cultivating *bhakti*. Myth-*rasa* combinations that work well include Siva burning Kama (anger), Krishna stealing the milkmaids' clothes (erotic love), and Ganesh riding on the rat/mouse and tripping over a snake with the moon laughing (humor). In what ways does humor further deepen a devotional relationship? The tactic helps students use embodied emotion to explore these affective dimensions of *bhakti* in courses that introduce thematic concepts such as myth or gods, as well as courses on Hinduism or world religions.

### **Navigating the Power of Embodied Learning in Religious Studies**

In Oldstone-Moore's (2009) essay, "Sustained Experiential Learning," she notes that one of the "key features of religion that is difficult to reproduce and grasp in a classroom setting [is] the power and transformative nature of the multisensory context of religious practice" (110). To talk abstractly or theoretically about the body and senses in relation to religious practice often comes across as distant or may create a further gap, and yet any methods used that directly engage bodied components must be framed well to avoid misunderstanding—we are not practicing religion, we are using practice to learn about religion.

There is a complex history of why embodied learning strategies have been and continue to be questioned in religious studies classrooms, in part due to the legacy of defining the academic study of religion in opposition to theological or confessional study among other factors (see LaMothe 2008). Some forms of embodied learning, such as respectfully delineated field site visits are noted for their impact on student learning within the frameworks of experiential education, active learning and kinesthetic learning styles (Roberts 2016). Other forms, such as yoga and meditation, along with other contemplative pedagogies, reflect measurable benefits for students that range from increased awareness and focus to analytical acuity and integration of knowledge (Simmer-Brown and Grace 2011), but also can lead to questions of appropriateness in public institutions and academic classes if they are (mis)perceived as only religious practices.

With unintentional fault lines such as these, faculty teaching in religious studies are perhaps more cautious and sensitized to navigating the power of bodied learning within respectful perimeters. As Michelle Mary Lelwica (2009), who incorporates Aikido, a Japanese martial art, into some of her religious studies courses states, "Bringing the body into the process of learning about religion introduces a kind of epistemic diversity that changes—and potentially enriches—our understanding of religious practices and beliefs by revealing the creative role the body plays in the construction of religious meaning" (126). With such great potential comes both risk and responsibility. Each embodied pedagogical strategy should be evaluated to weigh the benefits and necessarily framed with attention to each institutional context, course, and student population. If this is done well, the inclusion of bodied



knowledge within a multi-epistemological approach fulfills the potential of disrupting privileged ways of knowing and invites our students to wholeheartedly harness all of their resources in their learning process, feet first.

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