

Christianity and sport in the Republic of Serbia

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ABSTRACT

The main goal of this paper is to consider the most represented ideas about the connection between sports and Orthodoxy in the scientific papers of contemporary researchers in the Serbian intellectual and academic space. The content analysis method and the historical method were used in the paper. The paper will list the most influential personalities and relevant literature in the context of the mentioned ideas in the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries, as well as the most important organizations that promote the significant connection between sports activities and Orthodoxy in the Republic of Serbia.

Keywords: orthodoxy, sports, growing importance of sports

INTRODUCTION

In the textbooks and scientific papers of contemporary Serbian sociologists of sports, the phenomenon of religion and religiosity is considered in the most general sense: religion as a socio-cultural and historical phenomenon, different understandings of religion, the origin and development of religion, etc. (Kuljić & Koković, 2012; Milovanović, 2017, 2023; Radenović, 2021). The connection between sports and religion at the global level is described through individual examples: the connection between the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games and religion, the Maradonian Church phenomenon ('Iglesia Maradoniana'), the presence of religious rituals and the presence of tattoos with religious messages among top athletes, the example of the Orthodox sports association "Holy Serbia", as well as the strong influence of religion on one's own life and success in professional sports on the example of Russian MMA fighter Fedor Emelianenko (born 1976). Let us remember that in an interview with the Russian portal "Pravmir", Emelianenko states that he thinks that God sent him to these "sports waters" and that in this regard, he believes that this gives him the right to do his job to the best of his ability. Since in sports the greatest success is victory, it is important and it is proof that the job is done well, and since we Orthodox Christians are judged by our deeds, everything we do must be for the glory of God. To do the job in God's way, we must roll up our sleeves (Mihajlović, 2013; Radenović, 2021).

England is considered the cradle of modern sports, from which it spread first throughout Europe and the world. The system of modern sports was established by Thomas Arnold (pedagogue, historian and priest). According to Arnold, the goal of education should be the formation of a Christian athlete, a type of humble and healthy man, in whom the qualities of a medieval knight, an honorable Christian and a great lord are united. Thomas Arnold introduced physical education to Rugby College in addition to intellectual education, he also introduced care for the body by introducing various sports to the college: golf, cricket, football, rugby and rowing (Ilić, 1994).

According to Jovo Radoš (Radoš, 2019), Serbian contemporary philosopher of sport, Serbian tradition, spirit, belief and culture grounded in Christian deontology may be some kind of landmark in the complex field of professional sport. As Radoš states, an athlete should just follow his or her conscience that is, to do what is expected from man in order to comply with laws of God (Radoš, 2019). This author underlines the world's number one tennis player Novak Djoković (born 1987) as an example of sporting personality which is glowing as a true guard of genuine play, honour and humanity (Radoš, 2019). According to Radoš, Djoković is a man of faith really facing the heavens (both when winning and losing), he has always been demonstrating his ethical behaviour not through a simple and fake fair-play show but through his genuine desire to keep his soul clean (Radoš, 2019). In various sporting events and using any given chance, Djoković demonstrates his wish to "grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ" (Radoš, 2019, p. 21). This philosopher of sports considers the relationship between religion and sports in the broadest sense, so, he does not consider the relationship between Orthodoxy and sports. He recalls the fact that the Apostle Paul compared the Christian life with sports (Radoš, 2010, p. 139). In the Epistle to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul states the importance of the body for achieving a connection with God: "Or do you not know that your bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit who lives in you, whom you have from God...therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's (1 Corinthians 6:19, 20) (Holy Scripture

of the Old and New Testaments, 2012). According to the authors Đurica and Kondić (2015), dance is also mentioned in the Old Testament as a sign of liberation from material boundaries, and dance, and circle are a representation and celebration of spiritual life. The same authors state that dance, or rather dance, has been preserved to this day among Copts and other Christians and that movement leads to freedom, relief, and liberation from all the boundaries of this world, as well as that all piety is in movement. Radoš further notices some symmetries and connections between religion and sport: sport can have a strong spiritual aspect if it is imbued with respect for basic Christian values (Radoš, 2010). According to Radoš, the sports audience should harmonize and nurture their behavior according to the traditional Christian spirit, without hatred, violence and mutual conflict between teams and their fans, without mass fights with the police, etc. (Radoš, 2010). Finally, Radoš recalls the 2004 Athens Olympic Games and the relationship between the church and athletes. Namely, then, the highest clergy of the Greek Orthodox Church gave their blessing to the athletes and wished them success from God. On this occasion, special prayers were read through which athletes were invited to oppose all laziness and to strive to achieve a sporting accomplishment (Radoš, 2010).

Finally, according to the Serbian contemporary kinesiologists, the connection between sport and religion has always existed (Stefanović, 2011; Šiljak & Fragkiadakis, 2012). Within the framework of sports culture, sports activity elevates and promotes general culture and purity of the body, while religions, including Orthodox Christianity, elevate culture and purity of the spirit (Stefanović & Janković, 2015). Sport develops religious values such as strong character, perseverance... and as a religion, it promotes these traits and behaviors in people (Stefanović, 2011). Sport emphasizes tolerance and friendship among athletes, increases discipline through the rules of competition, and develops qualities such as: discipline, teamwork, focus on goals, moral virtues that are transferable to different situations in life (Stefanović, 2011). The Orthodoxy Christianity is a specific approach to competing of man against himself, while in sports it is a system of an athlete's preparation. The athlete's competition against himself is also reflected in the questions of 'who I am', 'what should I do', 'what is my power', and 'how does that translate into the everyday life'? From the Orthodox perspective, this can be, for example, a prayer that requires "mental fitness" much like an athlete needs physical fitness to succeed (Stefanović et al., 2018). These authors underline the importance and value of the prayer in the Orthodox Church. Namely, prayer in the Orthodox Church is of exceptional value as it includes many aspects of moving closer to God (Stefanović et al., 2018). As they expose, an athlete who uses prayer should have a wider Christian education so that he can pour out the feelings from his soul to God (Stefanović et al., 2018). When a man in sports understands what the goal of a religious athlete is, what a win is in this world, what the prayer for a win means, how much God is present in sports, and whether an individual in the Orthodox Church can influence the outcome of a competition ... then it is easier to come to the realization how much prayer can help us in our godly life when it comes to sports that should be filled with love, ease, enjoyment, joy, abundance, and celebration (Stefanović et al., 2018). They conclude that Orthodox believers may and it would even be reasonable to exercise and practice sports in the glory of God, that is, to act in the same way as stated in the Holy Bible (Stefanović et al., 2018). The Orthodox understanding of sport means fighting in your sport discipline not against time, opponents or nature, but against yourself. To overcome your vanity, pride, egoism – means to get closer to God (Vidaković, 2025). Related to the above is Matić's understanding that sport can influence spiritual development if every sporting success, every victory is dedicated to God and if it is believed that it was achieved with God's help. In the second case, if an athlete competes only to satisfy his personal ambitions, to put himself in the center of attention, there is a high probability that he will become too self-confident, to emphasize himself excessively and to lose faith in God (Matić, 2016).

Using the method of content analysis, the authors didn't notice scientific papers and textbooks that focus on studying the connection between Christianity, more precisely, Orthodoxy and sports in the Republic of Serbia in the 19th and 20th century. According to available data, for now, we may conclude that the topic that deals with the relationship between sports and Christianity i.e. Orthodoxy in Serbian contemporary society is not much researched topic. We claim this on the basis of very scarce sources.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SPORT AND CHRISTIANITY IN THE 19th AND 20th CENTURY

Regarding the 19th century, according to our information, there are no sources about the connection between sports and Christianity, (in our case: Orthodoxy), and if there are any, the authors have not been able to reach them. The authors assume that personal contact with, for example, a certain parish could be useful, but for now the authors have not been able to achieve it. In informal conversations with researchers of sports and religion, the researchers were unable to refer us to relevant sources.

Regarding the Orthodox theology and theological teaching of the 20th century, the authors can underline three important theorists (Nikolaj Velimirović, Justin Popović and Otac Tadej) and their numerous books, but the authors have not been able to find papers/books that specifically deal with the connection between sports and Christianity (in our case: Orthodoxy). The authors found one scientific paper (Đokić, 1999) regarding the andragogical thought and educational work of Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović.

The authors mention these important Orthodox theologians and some of their books (see [Table 1](#), [Table 2](#)).

Personalities and Literature

Nikolaj Velimirović (1881-1956)

Bishop of the eparchies of Ohrid and Žiča (1920–1956) in the Serbian Orthodox Church, influential theological writer, highly gifted orator and the Saint from 2003 (Saint Nikolaj of Serbia).

Table 1. The most important Orthodox theologians and some of their books

Author(s)	Year	Title
Velimirović	1986	Novi ideal u vaspitanju [A new ideal in education].
Đokić	1999	Andragoška misao i prosvetiteljski rad Vladike Nikolaja Velimirovića [Andragogical thought and educational work of Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović]
Popović	1999	Put bogopoznanja [The path of knowledge of God]
Popović	1999	Filozofske urvine [Philosophical steep cliffs]
Fr. Tadej	2002	Kakve su ti misli takav ti je život [What your thoughts are, such is your life]
Fr. Tadej	2004	Mir i Radošt u duhu svetom [Peace and Joy in the Holy Spirit]

Table 2. The most important contemporary authors and their books on Orthodoxy and sports

Author(s)	Year	Title
Vidaković	2001	Značaj i uloga pravoslavlja na planinarski pokret Srbije [Significance and role of Orthodoxy in the mountaineering movement of Serbia]
Vidaković & Đurica	2003	Molitva, askeza i sport [Prayer, asceticism and sport]
Vidaković & Milovanović	2015	Uticaj krsta i crkvenih zvona na prirodu i zdravlje [The influence of the cross and church bells on the nature and health]
Vidaković	2018	Hrišćanska etika u sportu – molitva, askeza i sport [Christian ethics in sports - Prayer, asceticism and sports]
Vidaković	2025	Sport i hrišćanstvo [Sports and Christianity]
Mitropolit Nafpaktosa & Sv. Vlasija	2006	Ljudsko tijelo, askeza i sport [The human body, asceticism and sport]
Đurica	2020	Adverzarije za bogoslovlje sporta: Razglobljavanja [Adversaries for the theology of sport: Dismantling]
Latinović	2010	Religija u sportu [Religion in sports]
Latinović	2015	Sport kao svetovna religija i ritualni obrazac ponašanja [Sport as a secular religion and ritual pattern of behavior]
Gojković	2017	Hrišćanstvo i sport [Christianity and sports]

Justin Popović (1894-1979)

Serbian Orthodox theologian, Archimandrite of the Ćelije Monastery, doctor of theology, professor at the University of Belgrade, and the Saint from 2010.

Otac Tadej [Father Tadej] (Tadej Štrbulović) (1914-2003)

Orthodox Archimandrite and Abbot of the Vitovnice Monastery.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SPORT AND CHRISTIANITY IN THE 21st CENTURY

The authors can freely say that this recent history is characterized by numerous books by Hadži Miloš Vidaković, the philosopher who analyzes the connection between Christianity and sports, especially on the example of the mountaineering movement of Serbia. The authors did not manage to get all his books, but only the book "Christian Ethics in Sports" (2018), which deals with the connection between the system of physical culture (sports, recreation, physical education) and Christianity. Here are some of the books of this author, the book of Metropolitan Nafpaktos and Sv. Vlasija (2006) and Ilarion Đurica (2020), as clergy. The authors will further mention the scientific paper and doctoral dissertation of Boris Latinović on the connection between sports and religion, and finally, one scientific paper written by Goran Gojković.

CURRENT SITUATION – “E-CHURCH” AND ORGANISATIONS

Sources from the Internet may indicate the emergence of the so-called ‘electronic churches’ in the broadest sense that operate through the media, especially through the Internet, and not at the local community meetings as it was common in the past. Here are some of the sources from the Internet that deal with the connection between religion and sports and the importance of the physical activities for each individual from the spiritual and health aspect.

Sources from the Internet (“Electronic church” – “E-Church”)

1. *Pravoslavlje i sport* [The Orthodoxy and sports] (2020)¹;
2. Čavka, S. (2018). *Sport kao sekularna religija* [Sport as a secular religion]²;
3. *Bavljenje sportom – pravoslavni pogled* [Practicing sports - the Orthodox view] (2014)³;

¹ Available at: <https://eparhijabacka.info/2020/02/18/pravoslavlje-i-sport/> accessed on 25.05.2025.

² Available at: <https://teologija.net/sport-kao-sekularna-religija/> accessed on 25.05.2025.

³ Available at: <https://www.pravoslavniroditelj.org/bavljenje-sportom/> accessed on 25.05.2025.

4. Sport i hrišćanstvo [*Sports and Christianity*] (2025)⁴;
5. *Tribina – Sport i pravoslavlje* [*Tribune – Sports and Orthodoxy*] (2013)⁵;
6. *Agape – Hrišćanstvo i sport* [*Agape – Christianity and Sports*] (2011)⁶.

Organisations

Finally, let us mention the organization named "*Holy Serbia*" which closely cooperates with the Serbian Orthodox Church.

The Orthodox Sports Society (PSD) of *Holy Serbia* was founded in 2003 by the will of Saint Vasilij Ostroski and the blessing of Father Dragan Ristić from Beran. Within this society, a musical ensemble was established for adults (which consists of a large number of parents of children who train in this society, coaches, musicians) and for children, where secular and spiritual Serbian and Russian songs were most often sung. There are also:

1. A speech section, where children speak God-pleasing texts, such as Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović's speech in London on Vidovdan;
2. Icon painting workshop;
3. A section where parts of Serbian costumes, Serbian dresses, waistcoats and dresses with ethnic motifs are sewn;
4. A creative workshop and an Orthodox workshop where children learn Psalter after the Liturgy.

Trainings in PSD Holy Serbia begin with the prayer of the Our Father, and end with the prayer of the Virgin Mary. All sections are free. The PSD of Holy Serbia has cooperated for many years with the celebrated Russian trainer, Evgeniy Lvov Zhenya, the trainer of the famous Fedor Emelianenko, the world champion in MMA fights, and international judo camps were organized together in Belgrade, and at the end of each camp, the Russian-Serbian Sports Friendship Academy was held in the City Assembly. PSD of Holy Serbia also organized a large number of humanitarian concerts. Free Russian language lessons are also organized in the society room. PSD of Holy Serbia has created a large community, consisting of priests, athletes, musicians, actors, parents of children who train in this society and cooperates with numerous musical ensembles, cultural and artistic societies, actors, singers, writers, professors... in Belgrade, as well as with numerous fiddle associations. The baptismal glory of the society is Saint Vasilije Ostroški.

The authors notice that with the growing importance of sports in contemporary Serbian society and the emphasis of its benefits for health and for the proper development of the personality in general, Orthodoxy and sports increasingly interpenetrate each other. In addition, professional sport is a kind of mirror of the nation and as such is recognized by the Serbian Orthodox Church as significant. The church is inextricably linked with the nation and its defeats, victories, pride and glory, and that is why the Serbian Orthodox Church distinguishes top athletes who contributed to the glory of the state and the nation with their efforts and provided the population with "sports" comfort in difficult times. The highest church recognition, more precisely, the Order of Saint Sava, is today worn by celebrated athletes such as Vlade Divac (born 1968), Dejan Bodiroga (born 1973) and Novak Djoković (born 1987). In the field of recreational sports, the Church organizes various sports events, the highlight of which is the *Sports Gathering of Holy Serbia*, which gathers thousands of recreational athletes. This manifestation indicates the tendency to intensify the intertwining of sports and Orthodoxy in the future through recreational sports. Related to this is the traditional swimming for the Holy Cross, which is held every year throughout Serbia on Epiphany, one of the fifteen biggest Christian holidays. Traditional swimming for the Holy Cross can be seen not only as a religious manifestation, but also as a type of sporting event of primarily recreational character. Namely, sport presumes competition in the first place, while in this case it is primarily a demanding physical activity, swimming, which symbolically marks the Baptism of Christ. That is why the swimming for the Holy Cross is often organized as the swimming with the Holy Cross and primarily is a kind of exhibition match (Mijatov & Radenović, 2023).

CONCLUSION

The relationship between Orthodoxy and sports has not been researched much within the intellectual and academic space in the Republic of Serbia. The aforementioned Serbian authors who opened up this complex topic point to the fact that Orthodoxy supports practicing sports, both professional and recreational, and that practicing sports can help every individual to behave and live in accordance with the Holy Scriptures (Mijatov & Radenović, 2023). The authors may conclude that previous researches on the relationship between Orthodoxy and sports as a specific sociocultural and historical phenomenon indicate the intensification of their relationship through the individual and social dimension. Regarding the individual dimension, the connection between sports and Orthodoxy can be seen in the fact that sports and faith make a person stronger and more ready to withstand numerous difficulties on the life's journey. Thus, both sport and Orthodoxy imply a series of temptations and tests that an individual must go through in order to confirm the faith, i.e. the strength and dedication on the way to a certain sports and recreational goal (Mijatov & Radenović, 2023). Regarding the social dimension, sport and Orthodoxy are the significant part of the national identity, which the Serbian Orthodox Church recognizes by awarding athletes who have contributed to the glory of the state and the nation through their sporting successes and efforts to make the Serbian national identity recognizable in the world.

⁴ Available at: <https://svetosavlje.org/sport-i-hriscanstvo/> accessed on 25.05.2025.

⁵ Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eboej6vSWdE> accessed on 25.05.2025.

⁶ Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E4rWe36X8E> accessed on 25.05.2025.

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