SPORTING SPIRITUALITY: RELIGIOUS NUANCES IN FOOTBALL
COMMENTARY

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ABSTRACT

Religious expression and sports are two culturally universal interests which are thought to vary drastically both in principle and in practice. Intriguingly, religion, spirituality and the supernatural are some of the most recurrent issues in sports broadcast. This paper investigated preoccupations with religious expression in the 2014 FIFA World Cup as discernible in the utterances of match commentators. I argue that there was widespread reference to the supermodal in the commentaries analyzed. Equally frequent was an awe-inspiring display of religious dynamism. I further contend that the overwhelming religious expression found manifestation through parody, religious exhibitionism and spiritual narcissism. In addition, the religious propensities displayed mirror postmodern viewpoints as they project diverse approaches and eclectically integrated beliefs and rituals. I conclude that triumph or failure in the World Cup could not be attributed to religious expression.

Key words: religious expression, supernatural, spirituality, parody, postmodern, FIFA World Cup, narcissism.
1.0 Introduction

Many narratives contain a religious undercurrent of meaning. As a form of narrative, football commentary incorporates an overwhelming presentation of religious expression as a key subject. Thus the 2014 FIFA World Cup TV commentaries featured sumptuous public demonstrations of religious predispositions such as pointing upwards to heaven, kneeling in thanksgiving or displaying under-shirts which display religious catchphrases. These acts of religious expression majorly bordered on spiritual narcissism, with the players showing glimpses of self-satisfaction, vanity and selfishness. Further, important religious figures and sites were frequently parodied in the commentaries analyzed. Postmodern religious fervor manifested itself in a hodge-podge of religious devotions and superstitions. Many players, especially of Pentecostal or Evangelical persuasion, employed extravagant exhibitions to declare their religious inclinations on and off the pitch. Religion and spirituality also found expression in the national anthems of the competing teams when these songs assumed the status of public devotions. These spectacles frequently caught the fancy of the commentators and the cameramen in the World Cup. Consequently, religious expression, in its diverse forms, became a major thematic concern in the commentaries analyzed.

1.2 Background to the Study

Scholes and Sassower (2014) have acknowledged the longstanding relationship between religion and sports. They posit that the history of sports abounds with athletes who acquired venerable status, to an extent that fans stalked them, paid dearly for their souvenirs and took pilgrimages to sports museums to look at their old outfits and playing gear. Many sportsmen and women cite
their faith as a decisive element of their performance. They view achievement in sporting activities as a testimony of God’s blessings to those who are pious and subservient, and failure as an indication of God’s testing of the player and probably the supporters. This justifies the amalgamation of sports, a seemingly profane activity, with the supposedly hallowed act of religion. Some scholars have noted that sports transforms a deep-seated religious impulse into an outward action. This impulse, according to Wenner (1989), is propelled by an instinct for freedom, reverence to rituals and a desire for excellence, after all sports “are organized and dramatized in a religious way.” These acts of religious expression usually find their way into the wide range of thematic issues that feature in the utterances of TV football commentators. This study, therefore, explored the manifestation of religion, spirituality and the supernatural in the 2014 FIFA World Cup TV commentaries.

2.0 Literature Review

Religion has always been associated with sports and, as stated by Higgs (1995), there is an overwhelming relationship between the two specialties. And although at some point in the past they appeared to be at variance, they have progressively turned out to be almost inextricable. Price (2001) notes that modern sport is inevitably interwoven with innumerable religious perceptions, some of which are exceedingly distorted. He cites the formation of a system in America in which sports was seen as a substitute for war and consecrated as a spiritual endeavor. Higgs observes that a movement he refers to as the “muscular Christianity” gave sporting competence a religious dimension. And to many Americans, the maxim of “a sound mind in a sound body,” which originally signified a healthy body for spiritual well-being, acquired a new secular element.
Price points out that some religious societies such as the YMCA were converted into what he calls “temples of physical fitness.” This sporting spirituality, according to him, soon permeated to the fans who would display some degree of religiosity in their team loyalties. The intensity of this religious enthusiasm will show in the size of bets some fans place, the sacrifices they make in order to attend important games and the kind of masking that they assume, all showing a sense of religious zeal in their loyalty.

Scholes and Sassower trace the connection between religion and sports to ancient times. According to them, the ancient Mayans’ sacrificed the losers of a ball game to their gods while during the initial Olympics the Greek gave as offerings to the gods their athletes. The fact that during the early Christian Church sports was used to elucidate divine truths illustrates the connection between religion and sports. In the Bible, the Apostle Paul states:

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\text{Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last: but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. (1 Corinthians 9:24-25)}
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Both religion and spirituality have in common a sense of the supernatural. According to Kenneson (2015), the term religion, usually associated with Abrahamic religions, has an institutional connotation. It involves rituals like the attendance of worship services such as mass or the lighting of Hanukkah candles. Spirituality, on the other hand, indicates personal practice and enablement, and has something to do with the inmost impulses of life. The term religious expression incorporates religion and spirituality and their tendency to ascribe to the supernatural. Many narratives contain a religious undercurrent of meaning. Similarly, there was an overwhelming presentation of religion as a key subject in FIFA 2014 World Cup.
The religious undertones in the football commentaries studied have been examined through the lenses of a postmodern religious viewpoint. In postmodernism, contends Kilgore (2004), modern ideologies of construing the world such as humanism, capitalism, feminism, Marxism or Christianity tend to hold onto some set of transcendental world view. Postmodernists, however, are opposed to the notion of absolute truths and all-encompassing forms of enlightenment, as stated by Usher and Edwards (1994); since disseminating such out-and-out knowledge could be oppressive. Kilgore concurs, stating that postmodernists abhor systems that elevate certain social conditions that only serve a small privileged segment of the society. Consequently, postmodernists discard Western values, beliefs, culture and norms. They instead focus on multiple, local truths rather than universal realities, or what Giroux (1993) calls “stories of the other” in order to comprehend the subjective nature of the world around them. Thus, to postmodernists, the terms “truth” and “falsehood” are interchangeable. Postmodernists believe that all knowledge is relative because it is influenced by cultural, traditional or language biases.

Postmodern religion, therefore, denies time-honored beliefs and conventions, upholding the evenly balanced legitimacy of all viewpoints. Postmodern religion is diverse in its approach, and so adherents may integrate eclectically various religious beliefs, practices and rituals into their own religious viewpoints. Thus postmodernists interpret religious truth as exceedingly individualistic and subjective. Postmodern religion effectively finds presentation in 2014 World Cup where religious fervor manifests itself in a hodge-podge of religious devotions and superstitions. Some of the most widespread of these practices include the habit of wearing lucky underwear, the kissing of a cross-shaped adornment just before kick-off or after scoring a goal, and pointing to the heavens in adoration of a divine being.

3.0 Theoretical Framework
This study views football commentary as a form of narrative, and so analysis was carried out within the precincts of postmodern narratology. The term narratology was invented by Tzvetan Todorov in 1969, and it was developed out of structuralism and Russian formalism. At times, narratology is referred to as the study of narrative. According to Groden, Kreiswirth, and Szeman (2012), narratology aims at defining the narrative-specific conventions governing narrative production and presentation. Narratology also delves into what makes one form of narrative differ from another, and in so doing it incorporates various narrative forms.

Narratology explores the main narrative tools of structure that appear in narrative media. This exploration makes reference to concepts which are shared by all media and forms, and other models which describe specific forms within given media. Narratology employs the "constructionist" viewpoint which embraces the social nature of the construction of meaning. Thus, the representational procedure rather than the producer or the item being represented facilitates the manifestation of meaning. Narratology regards story and discourse as the most basic features of narrative representation. As stated by Genette (1988), in its formal bearing, narratology indicates the study of narrative discourse; while in its thematic form it connotes an inquiry into the progression of events and actions associated with this discourse. Postmodern narratology, in particular, allows for the expansion of the narratological scope to accommodate the narratological analysis of other domains that are beyond the traditional media (Nunning 2003). Thus football commentary finds space within the confines of postmodern narratology.

4.0 Methodology

The study adopted the analytical research design. The researcher analyzed recorded television commentaries of three crucial 2014 FIFA World Cup matches broadcast by BBC and ESPN. The
commentaries were recorded from SuperSport; a South African group of television channels owned by Multichoice and carried on the DStv satellite platform. A television set connected to a satellite dish, a DVD recorder and blank digital versatile discs were used to record live transmissions of the selected commentaries. The researcher highlighted and coded specific phrases, sentences, paragraphs and ideas that explicitly signified religious expression. Eventually, the researcher critically analyzed the pre-stated objective through a systematic assessment of the coded material. Narrative, a qualitative data presentation format was used to present data collected; with direct quotes and paraphrases used to support and illustrate the stated objective.

5.0 Results and Discussion

The 2014 FIFA World Cup TV commentaries featured numerous acts of religious expression. These undertakings mainly displayed pointers of arrogance, vanity or selfishness. The commentaries also treated important religious figures and sites with ridicule or in a frivolous manner. The religious fervor expressed itself in an assortment of religious supplications and rituals, which is typical of postmodern religion. Many players used superfluous displays to declare their religious predispositions. Religion and spirituality also found expression in the singing of the national anthems of the competing teams. These spectacles would crystalize into religious expression – a major preoccupation of the World Cup commentaries.

5.1 Parody of Religious Emblems

In the World Cup commentaries examined, there were overwhelming allusions to religion, spirituality and the supernatural. In most of the cases, however, the emblems of religion such as important religious figures and sites were parodied, or at least treated in a lighthearted manner. According to Dentith (2000), parody is used to disparage the author, style or subject matter of
another earlier work using humor, satire or irony. Allusion can also be a means of achieving parody. Parody may portray the meaning of the original work as preposterous in order to highlight its inadequacies.

Parody of religious figures and sites is manifest in the match between Germany and France called by Jonathan Pearce for BBC. He calls Maracana Stadium, the venue of the event, the “spiritual home of Brazilian football” and the place where “Brazil hope to come for the final.” The use of the word “spiritual” by the narrator elevates the stadium to the status of a place of worship or other loca sancta that may possess psychic or supernatural powers. Smith (2014) says that football mirrors the profundity of Brazilian faith and football stadia are likened to a temple. The fact that Brazil hope to play at the Maracana at the World Cup final alludes to pilgrimages made by adherences of some religions to famous pilgrimage sites. The choice of the word ‘hope’ is apt, creating parallels with the ‘Christian hope’ mentioned in Titus 2:12–13, which instructs Christians “to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.” The implication here is that Brazil’s anticipated qualification for the World Cup final to be held at the Maracana will be a journey of great spiritual significance. And so, by likening Brazil’s qualification for the World Cup final at Maracana - a frivolous and irreligious event - to a religious excursion amounts to a charade of the Biblical heaven bound journey. The transcendental representation of the Maracana is further heightened by the sudden and uncalled for camera intrusion in the fourth minute of play on the imposing panorama of the statue of Jesus Christ the Redeemer overlooking the stadium. This larger-than-life statue of Jesus Christ, with arms outspread to symbolize peace, is perched on the Corcovado Mountain above Rio de Janeiro to offer a magnificent view of the city.
Customarily, statues have been dominant depictions of worship. On the whole, therefore, the picturesque view of Jesus Christ the Redeemer statue gives this match a mystical setting. Jesus, with his open arms, appears not only to welcome the visitors to Rio de Janeiro, and in particular, to Maracana Stadium, but also to consecrate the event. The statue, however, is later to be turned into an object of parody after Brazil’s heavy loss to Germany in the semis. A caption reading “we lost by this much” seems to depict Christ’s outstretched hands as gesticulating the 7:1 trouncing by the Germans. In the final match pitting Germany against Argentina, the narrator portrays irreverence towards the statue when in the second half of the match he quips: “There is no much in this, is there?” He further observes rather imprudently that no one would be queuing out there to see the statue instead of watching the ongoing match.

Equally parodied is Jorge Mario Bergoglio or Pope Francis of the Roman Catholic Church. As a native Argentine, Bergoglio is sensibly presumed to show allegiance to his motherland by backing Argentina in this tournament. However, prior to the event the Vatican rules out any likelihood of Pope Francis and his predecessor Pope Benedict XVI watching their home teams in the World Cup. Coincidentally, Pope Benedict is from Germany, the country that meets Argentina at the World Cup final. According to Rev. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesman, there will be no papal intervention in Argentina's favor during the matches involving their team. The resultant disillusionment precipitates ingenuity, as witnessed when an Argentine fan is caught on camera sporting a sidesplitting mask of Pope Francis as their national anthem is being played. The same unidentified fan is also seen applauding his team in the stands during the final game between Argentina and Germany.
The phony pope is dressed in hallowed, albeit mockup papal vestments such as the pallium, the zucchetto and the chasuble. The pallium is a narrow band with a loop in the center resting on the pope's shoulders. It is decorated with six crosses and three jeweled gold pins which symbolize the three nails used during the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The pallium is knitted from the wool of a white lamb to portray the wearer as the good shepherd who carries sheep over his shoulder. The zucchetto is a small, crescent ecclesiastical skullcap worn by Catholic clerics. Cardinals and bishops wear the zucchetto at Mass, while other ecclesiastics may not wear it at all without special papal authorization. Thus the pope’s vestments are laden with ecclesiastical significance, and so for a fan to wear them for a football match is a parody of the papal institution. It is obvious that the enthusiast is not only sporting these robes without papal authorization but also wearing them to a totally irreligious and frivolous occasion. Overall, the use of parody in these matches is in line with postmodern narratology which may draw narratives from other forms, parody or cross-reference them, thus obliterating the boundaries between serious and popular forms (Fludernik 2009).

5.2 Postmodern Religion

Football, like all other aspects of social life, is grappling with the rigors of accommodating an astonishingly wide array of diverse religious beliefs and value systems. This is characteristically anticipated when viewed through the prism of a postmodern world view. Postmodernists, according to Sweetman (2005), believe that no particular worldview can claim to have absolute truth since all the knowledge that constitutes a worldview cannot be truly objective. Postmodernists believe that all knowledge is relative because it is influenced by cultural, traditional or language biases. Postmodern religion views all viewpoints as equally legitimate,
and so it integrates a variety of religious beliefs, practices and rituals. Religious truth is construed as personal and subjective. In the 2014 World Cup postmodern religious fervor found expression through a mixture of diverse religious rituals and practices.

Some of these religious ceremonials have gained universal charm and acceptance, and the World Cup presented a fitting platform to showcase them. In the tournament’s opening match between the hosts Brazil and Croatia, a brief dove releasing ceremony is performed moments before kick-off. The releasing of the doves at the commencement of the World Cup bequeaths the tournament sacred eminence. In Christian iconography the dove is a symbol of the Holy Spirit and Mary has been shown being consecrated by a dove at the moment of Annunciation. At his baptism, Jesus was blessed by the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. In Hebrews times, doves and pigeons were the only birds sanctioned for sacrifice, according to Leviticus 1:14. On their part, Muslims believe that a dove whispered the words of Allah into Muhammad’s ear. Nowadays, the dove is portrayed as a symbol of peace, often with an olive branch in the mouth, an iconography taken from the story of Noah releasing the bird to bring back confirmation that the floodwaters were retreating. And to broaden this spiritual atmosphere, Darke announces that the Pope had wished everybody good luck by twitter.

After this public demonstration of religiosity, the players carry out their own exclusive rituals. An apt illustration is the Croatian goalkeeper, Stipe Pletikosa during the festival’s opening match between his team and Brazil. He is known as a deeply spiritual player who harbors hardline views regarding God and the purpose of life. The narrator describes him as a very religious player who wears a Virgin Mary tee-shirt under his goalkeeping jersey. And just before kick-off,
Pletikosa is seen leaning on the woodwork and saying a prayer which he relies on for protection against injury. After scoring the equalizing goal for Brazil, Neymar points to the skies and seems to intone a prayer thanksgiving to the Almighty. The match though stands at 1:1, even though both Pletikosa for Croatia and Neymar had taken time to turn to the supernatural, albeit in varying forms. This undermines any rational comprehension of the role played by spirituality and the supernatural in this tournament.

5.3 Religious Exhibitions

Smith (2014) observes that there is no other country that mixes up sport and spirituality so effortlessly like Brazil which, according to him, embraces a cocktail of religion, emotion and superstition. Smith depicts a picture of postmodern religion with its emphasis on experience over reason, subjectivity over objectivity, spirituality over religion, outward over inward. He asserts that although it is often alleged that football is a religion in Brazil, the reality is that football is used as a springboard for the country's religions to find expression. Indeed, in the Brazil versus Croatia match the commentator likens Brazilian football to religion when he says: “The dream of football is like religion.”

A noticeable number of Brazilian players are known to exhibit publicly their spiritual preferences. In the FIFA 2002 World Cup, for instance, Kaka, the Brazilian star midfielder stripped down to an under-shirt proclaiming "I belong to Jesus" after scoring a goal. Thiago Silva, the deeply religious team captain in the 2014 edition, often repeats the ritual of looking up to the sky and praying. Silva credits his earlier recovery from tuberculosis to God. David Luiz, a current Brazilian defender is labeled a devoted Christian and together with his teammate Neymar they identify Kaká as their spiritual role model. Luiz was quoted saying: "My faith gives me the
belief that I can go out and perform and improve as a player. It gives me strength and inspiration." He believes in fate, as indicated by his conviction that "everything in life belongs to God," and that “our purpose has already been mapped out.” Revealingly, he received baptism in the indoor swimming pool of his teammate Maxwell. Neymar, Brazil’s leading striker in 2014, is an Evangelical Christian who once spoke about his faith saying that "life only makes sense when our highest ideal is to serve Christ!"

The semi-final match between Brazil and Germany epitomizes the infusion of religion to sports. Indeed, before the kickoff, Brazil’s players use religious symbols, lucky charms, music and prayer, all portraying the eclectic nature of their spirituality. Even though the match climaxes in a battering for Brazil, some of the Brazilian players, notably Luiz and Gustavo, are shown on their knees apparently in fervent prayer or meditation. As practicing Christians, it is probable that the duo derive their inspiration from Titus 5:18 – “In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.”

Brazil versus Colombia quarterfinal match played in Fortaleza is another fitting example of the infusion of spirituality to sport. Smith says that before the match the coach, Filipe Scolari had visited a chapel in the grounds of the team hotel. And in the dressing room prior to kick off, the squad recite the Lord's Prayer. When Thiago Silva scores the opening goal he goes on his knees and turns his face to the heavens in an apparent act of supplication. At the final whistle, defender David Luiz sinks to his knees and prays again. Many athletes see their spirituality as a critical motivation for their performance, and Smith cites Luiz as an ardent proponent of this belief when he quotes the player saying:
"My faith in Jesus gives me strength to keep on going out onto the field and to do my best," he says. "But I also want to inspire others - that is what God inspires me to do. For me, true life is found in the relationship with Jesus Christ. I believe that everything in life belongs to God and he has a clear plan for us if we follow him."

The 2014 FIFA World Cup was accentuated by the extravagant fashion Brazilian players, especially of Pentecostal or Evangelical persuasion, employed to declare their religious inclinations on and off the pitch. The players would exhibit their faith by pointing upwards to heaven after a goal, kneeling to give thanks after a triumphant match or displaying under-shirts which proclaim religious messages. FIFA had in the past censured the Brazilian football establishment for sanctioning the practice, reminding them of a rule that states that "....the basic compulsory equipment must not have any political, religious or personal statements."

And although Brazil stand out in their spiritual dynamism, there were indeed players from other World Cup participating teams who made no secret of their faith, regularly imploring the supernatural to grant them special favors, or acclaiming Heaven when things go their way. Among them was Wesley Sneijder, the Dutch midfield maestro and one of the stars of the 2014 World Cup. Croatian goalkeeper, Stipe Pletikosa is described as a very religious player who spends ten days every summer in a monastery, and wears a Virgin Mary tee-shirt under his goalkeeping jersey. Similarly, some match officials are also associated with one religious faith or another. The centre referee in the opening match between Brazil and Croatia, for instance, is a Protestant clergyman who prefers to be called Marco (Spanish equivalent for Mark) due to his Christian faith.

5.4 Spiritual Narcissism

Some of the players seem to express their spirituality through the disconcerting phenomenon of spiritual narcissism. Narcissism has been defined by Sheridan (2017) as an absolute
preoccupation with oneself, and may comprise conceit, egotism, vanity and selfishness. Spiritual narcissism is a form of spiritual bypassing, also known as ego inflation. Spiritual narcissism advances one’s favorite tradition or spiritual preference as exclusive. Spiritual narcissists use practices or beliefs to hoist themselves above others. Welwood (2000) describes this ego-centered spiritual exclusivity as an attempt to shake off a personal sense of insecurity by exhibiting a veneer of excessive religious or spiritual accomplishment while the inner reality is a massive sense of apprehensiveness or worthlessness.

Religiously narcissistic people, regardless of their degree of piety, are likely to exercise poor moral discernment according to their own affected value systems, and hence perform acts of flagrant hypocrisy. Tahilian (2016) sees narcissism as so engulfing that it beguiles people to comport themselves in ways that are contrary to their moral values. Cooper & Pullig (2013) concur, arguing that those who identify themselves as religious are more susceptible to narcissism. To narcissists, everything is all about them, implying a high degree of egotism. Narcissists disregard the rules regulating other people’s behavior. They also ride on other people to attain their goals and are impervious or noncompliant to the norms of the society. According to Lurie (2009), spiritual narcissism creates the semblance of devoutness as an ego stratagem to conceal anxiety and invite commendation. Thus narcissism may make it difficult for the religious to be honest.

Neymar, the Brazilian superstar, for instance, displays narcissistic tendencies on various occasions despite his impressive spiritual resume. In the opener between his team and Croatia, he scores a controversially awarded penalty. And after snatching this unmerited goal he still goes on his knees, lifts his hands and faces the skies in apparent act of thanksgiving for what he considers
a show of divine intercession. His actions are clearly a gross contravention of the Christian principle of honesty as stated in Proverbs 20:10: *Divers weights, and divers measures, both of them are alike abomination to the Lord* (KJV). The text seems to suggest that the Christian God does not approve of injustice, cheating or oppression, and so for Neymar to purport to associate the goal with providence is not only a parody of Christian faith and its tenets but also a demonstration of blatant self-centeredness. Neymar’s self-congratulatory antics, accompanied by the profuse display of appreciativeness to the Almighty for this unjust goal is an act of hypocrisy that portrays him as a man hell bend to attain his wishes by all means. Pletikosa, the Croatia goalkeeper, on the other hand, can only scratch his scalp after failing to stop a shot when he would have easily punched it wide. His religiosity seems ineffective here even though, according to the narrator, he “apparently spends ten days every summer in a monastery.” The commentator adds somewhat acerbically that rather than engaging with his religious obsessions this summer “he will have a long time thinking about what happened here.”

Spiritual narcissism borders on hero worship, with some elite players being elevated by their peers to near mystical status. Again here Brazil’s Neymar proffers an appropriate illustration. Although the striker does not feature in the Brazil versus Germany match owing to an injury, his no. 10 shirt is held aloft by David Luiz and his goalkeeper, Julio Cesar during the playing of Brazil’s national anthem. The players hope to draw inspiration from their idol. Luiz is one of the most spiritual members of the team who, intriguingly, contributes immensely to the heavy defeat Brazil suffers in the hands of the Germans. The commentator depicts the irony after the 5th goal by putting the blame squarely on the defender: “that’s down to David Luiz – no discipline … he goes charging … there is a big hole to run into and they get punished again.” The implication
here is that the bountiful displays of spirituality or religiosity hardly influence the fortunes of the players and teams in the field of play.

5.5 National Anthems as Public Prayers

One area where religion and the supernatural find expression is in the content and performance of national anthems at the beginning of each match in the World Cup. Indeed, a very thin line separates some national anthems and public prayers for those particular nations. The Croatian national anthem, sung before all matches involving their team, is a fitting example of the accord between anthems and public invocations. This is especially so in the first stanza which offers a supplication of blessing for the “Beautiful Homeland.”

Our Beautiful Homeland
Beautiful is our homeland,
O so fearless, o so gracious,
Our fathers' ancient glory,
May God bless you, live forever!

Other than the statement of patriotism and nationalism apparent in words and phrases such as ‘homeland’ and ‘our fathers’ ancient glory,’ the players will derive inspiration from ‘o so gracious’ and ‘ancient glory.’ The invocation ‘God bless you’ is a regular response in the liturgies of most Christian assemblies, thus turning the stanza into a form of a communal religious rendition. Despite the impassioned supplications Croatia does not advance to the knockout stages of the tournament, further casting doubt on the compatibility of religious expression and sporting achievement.

The Netherlands national anthem, popularly known as the "Wilhelmus” also serves as a public prayer. It was originally a poem composed in 1567 by Prince William of Orange who had fled
from tyranny and religious persecution of Spanish rule under Philip II in the Netherlands. The song is an encouragement to the Prince and to his cause. In stanza 2, the Prince articulates his sincerity as well as his drive for revolting against the King of Spain. The grand speech is interposed by a prayer in verses six and seven. William reassures his followers while at the same time urging them to join in the insurgency. He underscores his followers’ obligation to submit to God. In stanza 8 which is an allusion to 1 Kings 21, 22, the poet likens the Prince to the Biblical King David who takes flight from King Saul before he ascends the throne. Stanza 6 alludes to Psalm 3:3: *But You, O LORD, are a shield about me, my glory, and the One who lifts my head.*

Stanza 7 makes reference to Psalm 7:1: *O Lord my God, in thee do I put my trust: save me from all them that persecute me, and deliver me* (KJV). As per Jamieson, Fausset & Brown (1996), the occasion of this Psalm is some event in David's persecution by Saul. He prays for relief because he is innocent, and God will be glorified in his vindication. He thus celebrates God's righteousness in defending the upright and punishing the wicked whose malignant devices will result in their own ruin.

The parallels between the Dutch national team on the one hand and Prince William of Orange and King David on the other are quite palpable. Revealingly, the moniker for the team is Oranje, Dutch for orange. During the semifinal match between the Netherlands and Argentina, for instance, Jon Champion, the match commentator for ESPN, uses ‘orange’ as a metonymy for the Dutch team when he says: “Orange are within touching distance of back to back finals.” The analogy portrays the players as martyrs fleeing from tormentors and blasphemous pretenders to their dominions. The lyrics of the anthem, therefore, are likely to create some kind of a siege
mentality and propel them to fight for their dear life. Ironically, the players are motivated more by the desire to revenge for past injustices and defeat than by the inspirational words of the psalter quoted in the Wilhelmus. Champion points out that the Dutch will be seeking to avenge for the loss at the final of 1978 World Cup “won in extra time by Mario Kempes inspired Argentina.” Kempes is a retired Argentine player. History repeats itself and the Dutch lose again to an Argentine team whose national anthem does not even have lyrics! Thus the supplications inherent in these anthems are of no consequences in as far as the final results of the matches are concerned.

5.6 Conclusion

From the discussion advanced above, religious expression is portrayed as an integral aspect of the 2014 FIFA World Cup. The commentators’ utterances abound with references to religion, spirituality and the supernatural. A good number of these religious or spiritual expressions, however, border on spiritual narcissism, with the players showing glimpses of self-satisfaction, vanity and selfishness. Religion and spirituality were also expressed in the national anthems which tended to replicate public devotions. Overall, however, commentaries portray these religious and spiritual endeavors as having no discernible impact on match results.

References


