

RELIGION, SPORT, AND THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL SON: THE POSTSECULAR RHETORIC OF LEBRON JAMES'S 2014 "I'M COMING HOME" OPEN LETTER

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In 2010, LeBron James, "The Chosen One," humiliated Northeast Ohio by announcing on nationwide television that he was leaving the Cavaliers to play for Miami. James announced his return to Cleveland four years later through an open letter that set off euphoria in the region. This essay offers a postsecular framework to explain: (1) how James's messianic image established a context in which his departure, in tandem with the way he announced his decision, made James a "sinner" in the eyes of Cleveland fans, and (2) how his open letter adapted the parable of the Prodigal Son to depict him as the son of Northeast Ohio who had made mistakes, rather than sinned and, simultaneously, as the wise father who was forgiving of others. James portrayed his departure as a necessary step in gaining maturity, yet—much like the Prodigal Son—admitted to a revelation about his relationship with Northeast Ohio.

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From July 2010 to July 2014, LeBron James was one of the best players in the National Basketball Association (NBA) and also one of the most reviled individuals in Northeast Ohio, whose inhabitants felt he had abandoned them when he left the Cleveland Cavaliers in search of an NBA championship with the Miami Heat. Fans responded to the departure of “King” James with both extreme sadness and extreme anger to the extent that the Cavaliers added extra security the first time that he returned to play with the Heat.¹ In July 2014, James again became a free agent, and NBA fans, including those in Northeast Ohio, waited to see what he would do. Time had dissipated negative emotions, but James—a native of nearby Akron—still had not formally reconciled with the region he called home.

On July 11, 2014, *Sports Illustrated’s* website posted an open letter from the basketball standout, entitled “I’m Coming Home,” that announced his return to Cleveland. James’s message directly addressed Northeast Ohio, as he recalled his childhood there, admitted to “mistakes,” and recontextualized his years with the Heat as a learning experience that had given him maturity and that could help him lead Cleveland to better fortunes. Throughout the letter, James drew on religious language, as when he referred to “my calling here” both on and off the basketball court. The player concluded that he was now “ready to accept the challenge. I’m coming home.”²

With news of James’s return, Cleveland and the surrounding environs erupted in a crescendo of jubilation that began with spontaneous celebrations outside the Cavaliers’ Quicken Loans Arena and James’s home in Akron, continued in various venues such as social media, and culminated a month later with over 30,000 ecstatic fans filling the University of Akron’s football stadium for “Welcome Home LeBron” festivities.³ Positive reactions to James’s return might have been expected out of sheer self-interest because Northeast Ohio was still hungry for a championship, while James’s ongoing philanthropic work in the region also likely tempered earlier wounds.⁴ Nonetheless, the exuberance of the region’s response was the talk of local and national media and, at the Akron homecoming, visibly touched James himself.⁵

The star player clearly engaged in what William L. Benoit refers to as “image restoration” by releasing his open letter, rather than simply announcing that he was returning to the Cavaliers, but we maintain that what makes James’s image restoration efforts especially interesting is the way in

which his message adapted the familiar narrative of the Prodigal Son to reestablish his relationship as Northeast Ohio's "Chosen One."⁶ James depicted himself as the region's "son" whose roots there ran deep. Rather than explicitly confessing his sins, however, James admitted only to unspecified "mistakes" and positively reframed his time in Miami as part of a necessary education that marked his transformation from a child into a man and from a good player into a better player. James demonstrated this new maturity by assuming the role of the father in the biblical parable and exemplifying forgiveness in his response to the outbursts of anger directed at him when he left. At the same time, James retained his role as the Prodigal Son by explaining his decision to return as a result of a revelation in which he had realized how important his "relationship with Northeast Ohio" was to him and then recommitting himself to leadership both with the Cavaliers and the larger Northeast Ohio community.

Rhetorical analysis of the case of LeBron James answers the call of Jeffrey Scholes and Raphael Sassower for research that takes a postsecular approach to the study of popular culture arenas like sport.⁷ The postmodern era has increased both the intersections of sport and religion and their influences on one another, in particular through ever-present commercialization.⁸ Especially relevant to our purposes here, Scholes and Sassower explain that sport often displaces—rather than replaces—organized religion as the arena for the discussion of moral integrity.⁹ Some rhetorical scholars, of course, have examined the appearance of religion in sport discourse,¹⁰ and Richard MocarSKI and Andrew C. Billings have studied the co-construction of James's "Chosen One" image through the player's own language and behaviors as well as Nike advertising starting early in his career.¹¹ In this essay, however, we offer a postsecular framework as a way to understand (1) how James's messianic image established a context in which his departure to Miami, in tandem with the way he announced his decision, made James a "sinner" in the eyes of Cleveland fans, and (2) how his open letter responded to the demands of this rhetorical situation through its adaptation of the Prodigal Son.

Sport is an especially ripe arena for the analysis of rhetorical efforts at redemption, given the issues of morality that perpetually appear there today. Indeed, numerous scholars have applied Benoit's image restoration strategies to sport apoloia.¹² While such analyses occasionally mention religious appeals—Michael R. Kramer notes Marion Jones's reference to her

religious faith as one way in which she attempted to bolster her image after being found guilty of steroid use¹³—these studies have focused on Benoit’s image restoration typology rather than on athletes’ adoption of religious language. Daniel A. Grano, meanwhile, has recognized the importance of mores in sport today with his rhetorical analyses of “character” talk in the National Football League (NFL) draft as well as institutionalized efforts to approve conditions for the forgiveness of NFL quarterback Michael Vick upon his release from prison for dogfighting.¹⁴ Again, though, Grano has done so without an explicit focus on religious language. Because of the pervasiveness of sport as an economic, cultural, and political force in today’s postsecular era,¹⁵ and the long-term persistence of messianic rhetoric associated with LeBron James, the case study of his return to Cleveland offers an opportunity to examine the role that religious rhetoric in sport may play in the creation, destruction, and reconstruction of community bonds.

In the following, we first discuss a postsecular perspective on the rhetoric of religion and sport. We then turn to the context of Northeast Ohio, the construction of James’s image as the Chosen One, and *The Decision*, in which he announced he was going to Miami. After examining how these factors contributed to perceptions that James had sinned, we analyze the rhetoric of his open letter and evidence for how fan responses echoed its themes of redemption. Finally, we discuss the implications of our analysis.

SPORT, RELIGION, AND RHETORIC: A POSTSECULAR PERSPECTIVE

At first blush, religion and sport may appear to fall, respectively, into the distinct realms of the sacred and the profane, but religion and sport actually have intersected almost from the start. Visitors to the ancient site of the Olympic games, for example, will find the ruins of athletic facilities intermixed with the ruins of temples to Hera and Zeus. Nor is it surprising that the Apostle Paul, who preached in places like Athens and Corinth, was fond of using sports metaphors like the victorious runner of a race in his messages to followers or would-be followers of Christ.¹⁶ In *The Rhetoric of Religion*, Kenneth Burke observed that humans borrow their words for the ineffable from the natural realm, the sociopolitical realm, and the verbal realm of logology or “words about words,” including “dictionaries, grammar, etymology, philology, literary criticism, rhetoric, poetics, dialectics.”¹⁷ Our rhetoric for religion draws on other domains, including sport within

the sociopolitical realm, which necessarily leads to their interspersion. Just as Martin J. Medhurst argued that Americans may “legally separate Church from State, but we have never separated religion from government or public policy,”¹⁸ scholars today have noted the ways in which religion and sport have consistently intertwined.

One dominant perspective is what Scholes refers to as the instrumental model, which argues that religion uses sport and sport uses religion.¹⁹ In the United States, the employment of sport on behalf of religion includes such activities as witnessing by early twentieth-century evangelist and professional baseball player Billy Sunday, who wore his uniform while preaching; the development of Muscular Christianity as a means of simultaneously strengthening the body and spiritual resistance to temptations; and the endorsement of organized sport by Roman Catholics, Mormons, Jews, and Protestants, including evangelicals, as a way to attract and enhance religious commitment.²⁰ Conversely, sport uses religion to legitimize, explain, and/or promote sport in some way. Players may credit God for a winning goal, while fans may attribute their team’s poor play to supernatural forces. For instance, a construction worker and Boston Red Sox fan went so far as to bury the jersey of Red Sox standout David Ortiz in Yankee Stadium as a means to reverse the “Curse of the Bambino” that was thought to have prevented Boston from winning the World Series from 1918 to 2004.²¹ Scholes writes that religion also “furnishes sport with a vocabulary that may correspond more closely” with the transcendent emotions and experiences of sport, as when fans make “pilgrimages” to “sacred” stadiums like Wrigley Field. In the instrumental model, however, sport tends to be the subordinate partner because religion employs sport for its own ends, or religion, as a dominant cultural discourse, becomes a lens for understanding sport.²²

A second perspective on religion and sport is the equation model, which argues that sport *is* a religion.²³ In *The Joy of Sports*, for example, Michael Novak contends that just as the United States has civil religion, sport is another form of secular religion. He writes, “sports flow outward into action from a deep natural impulse that is radically religious: an impulse of freedom, respect for ritual limits, a zest for symbolic meaning, and a longing for perfection. The athlete may of course be pagan, but sports are, as it were, natural religions.”²⁴ While Novak may be the most well-known scholar to make this argument, others have, as well.²⁵ Scholes points out that the equation model also prioritizes religion because adherents argue that sport

is a religion, rather than that religion is a sport. Moreover, both the instrumental and equation models conceptualize the relationship between religion and sport as fixed: while religion and/or sport may evolve over time, the relationship between them does not.²⁶

A new, alternative approach to understanding the relationship between religion and sport in the United States is the postsecular model, which affirms a dynamic relationship in which religion and sport each “retains a kind of boundary around its discourse that is able to inform, support, critique, and illuminate the other discourse in a post-secular environment.”²⁷ Although the Enlightenment project anticipated that secularism and rationality would supplant religion, postsecularism argues that we instead now live in a postsecular era where secularism and religiosity intermingle.²⁸

The preeminence of capitalism has contributed to this state of affairs by commercializing and democratizing religion. In their efforts to attract adherents, religious institutions like megachurches have turned to marketing techniques such as focus groups and advertisements, and even fundamentalist religious movements that purport to challenge consumer values actually promote lifestyles built on particular foods, forms of education, types of dress, and so on. In addition, online outreach has individualized religion by subverting the need to go to an actual synagogue, church, mosque, or temple to engage in religious practice with physically present others. This commercialization, particularly through mediated messages, has made religion readily available to anyone. As a result, Bryan S. Turner argues, the “twin processes of commercialization and democratization” have flattened religious hierarchies and “helped to break down the old division between religion and the world, contributing to the contraction of the span of transcendence.”²⁹ Religion’s embrace of consumerism through the adoption of popular culture messages (billboards, social media, TV commercials) also makes it far more difficult to discern where the sacred ends and the secular begins.

At the same time that religion has become less remote and more attentive to the secular environment, the secular realm of popular culture has become increasingly more religious.³⁰ Hollywood has found a way to capitalize on Jewish and/or Christian audiences through faith-based films like *Noah*, *God’s Not Dead*, and *Heaven Is for Real*, while Jesus Daily remains among the most popular Facebook pages, and Christian bands like Skillet and

Newsboys have a sizable hold on the niche music market. HindiShaadi.com promises that it will help people find mates who are Hindu, but similar sites exist for Mormons, Muslims, Christians, and those of other faiths, as well.³¹ On television, *Of Kings and Prophets*, *The Real O'Neals*, and *The Path* deal with the complexities of religion pertaining, respectively, to King Saul and King David of the Bible, an Irish American Catholic family, and an American family caught up in a faith movement that may be a cult.³² Sport itself has adopted what some critics call “Christotainment,” by explicitly marketing to churchgoers.³³ Meanwhile, religious messages related to New Age religion and spirituality abound in culture generally, whether it is the popularity of figures like Deepak Chopra or practices like feng shui, the development of publications such as *Spirituality and Health* magazine, the continuing fascination with *Star Wars*, or our culture’s immense fixation with superheroes in comic books, graphic novels, and film.³⁴ Indeed, Terry Ray Clark writes that religious themes, values, and ideas appear so regularly in popular culture “practices and products” today that they often go unnoticed except by those who intentionally pursue their study.³⁵

This intermixing of the sacred and the profane also has its roots in the multiculturalism and technology of postmodernism. While the embrace of pluralism permits greater acceptance of diversity, and new technology offers many societal benefits, Conrad Ostwalt notes that they have a downside, too: “The call to diversity threatens to polarize society into insular camps and identities based on race, gender, affiliations, and ideologies. Technology, from air-conditioning to e-mail, makes this separation possible, threatens to insulate us from personal contact, and frees us from the necessity of community building. This depersonalization threatens to cut us off from familiar ways of considering the mysteries and myths formerly housed in religious traditions and in institutionalized religious rituals.” As a result, the innate human desire to connect with the transcendent leads religion to express itself in the secular world, particularly in popular culture practices and messages.³⁶ And this leads us back to sport.

A postsecular approach to religion and sport argues not that sport, a part of the secular world, has replaced religion, nor that sport is a religion, but—as Scholes and Sassower assert—that “sports can *displace* the exclusive centrality of religious institutions as the *only* backdrop for political and moral integrity. Sports does so by engaging themes and concepts historically reserved for religious use and then transmits the meaning of those in

more culturally relevant ways than religion can currently do.” For instance, Pete Rose’s efforts—as of yet unsuccessful—to gain admittance to the Hall of Fame after gambling on his team’s games provide a contemporary lesson on the idea of redemption.³⁷ In the postsecular model, religion and sport are different entities, but they also borrow symbolic frameworks from one another and have the ability to impact one another.³⁸ We can find evidence for such intermingling and influence in recent rhetorical scholarship. Michael L. Butterworth, for example, examined the proliferation of “Faith Nights” at major and minor league ballparks as a means by which Christian organizations promote Christianity and ball clubs promote game attendance. However, he also raised concern that this rhetoric threatens to change sport by damaging the pluralism of baseball.³⁹ Conversely, John Gribas analyzed the team metaphor so many evangelical Christian churches in the United States have adopted and worried that its implicit focus on “doing” was at odds with the traditional church metaphor of the Body of Christ and its focus on “being” in ways that could prove detrimental to the religious nature of these institutions.⁴⁰ From a postsecular perspective, the frameworks of religion and sport—the sacred and the secular—can exist and interact without one subsuming or destroying the other.⁴¹

In this essay, we are particularly interested in how sport adopts religious symbolic frameworks, such as sacrifice, relics, and pilgrimage. In today’s postmodern world of frequent insularity, sport also offers a way to identify with others and to experience moments of transcendence.⁴² This does *not* mean that sport has replaced religion. Instead, sport is a nonreligious context in which rhetors draw on longstanding religious language and symbols—“culturally available” and extremely familiar to us—to communicate, often about issues related to moral integrity.⁴³ In some instances, these choices may be intentional and strategic, while at other times individuals may instinctively draw on this rhetoric to make sense of the world of sport.

Perhaps no better example of the intermingling of religion with American sport today can be found than in the case of LeBron James’s departure from Cleveland to play for the Miami Heat in 2010 and his subsequent return in 2014. Before turning to James’s efforts at redemption, however, one has to understand the cultural context of Northeast Ohio and the rhetorical construction of James as “The Chosen One” who would help

redeem the region, a construction that only heightened perceptions that he had sinned in going to Miami.

NORTHEAST OHIO, THE MAKING OF JAMES AS "THE CHOSEN ONE," AND THE SIN OF *THE DECISION*

In the latter half of the twentieth century, Cleveland, Ohio became the punch line of Americans' jokes. Time and again, headlines brought attention and derision to the once great industrial town. The Cuyahoga River caught fire in 1969—just the latest of several blazes in its history—due to an oil slick caused by years of industrial waste dumping.⁴⁴ In 1972, Mayor Ralph Perk's toupee also caught fire when he attempted to use a welder's tool to cut a ceremonial ribbon at a convention site opening.⁴⁵ Starting in the 1960s, the decline of the auto and steel industries decimated local and regional economies, especially in Cleveland and other Northeast Ohio cities like Akron and Youngstown. Residents, particularly white residents, left city centers for better economic opportunities, which further eroded the tax base of the cities and contributed to black poverty.⁴⁶ In 1978, the "boy mayor" of Cleveland, Dennis Kucinich, became the first head of a major city to default on loans since the Great Depression.⁴⁷ "The Mistake by the Lake" was the poster child for Rust Belt economics and midwestern futility.

If political and economic indicators were plaguing Northeast Ohio in the latter half the twentieth century, however, the story of Cleveland sports teams certified the failure of both the city and the surrounding region. One had only to mention "The Shot" to recall how Chicago Bull Michael Jordan defeated the Cleveland Cavaliers in the 1989 playoffs. "The Drive" was the two-minute drill executed to perfection by Denver Bronco great John Elway that upset the Cleveland Browns in the 1987 American Football Conference (AFC) championship game. Worse were self-defeating acts by Cleveland players, as with the "Red Right 88" interception in the 1981 AFC division playoff or "The Fumble" in the 1988 AFC championship. Cleveland then lost even a chance to compete when owner Art Modell moved the team to Baltimore in 1995.⁴⁸ While the NFL created a new Browns franchise for the city in 1999,⁴⁹ the team still did not win, nor did the Cavaliers or the Indians succeed. The cumulative effect of all of Cleveland's much-publicized losses was, by 2010, a nearly 50-year sport championship drought that seemingly cast the region as the land of losers. Yet for all these near misses, failures, and

insults, arguably the greatest personal offense to Northeast Ohio sport fans would come in *The Decision* at the hands of one of their own.

LeBron James was born in Akron, Ohio, just 45 minutes from Cleveland, in 1984. He experienced the economic hardships of the region firsthand as the only son of a father who abandoned him and a teenage mother who struggled to raise him. After the death of his grandmother, James and his mother lived as nomads, sleeping on the couches and floors of friends and relatives willing to take them in and then moving to the next place. James began missing a great deal of school. In the midst of all these struggles, he later recalled, the young boy dreamed “of being a superhero, fighting crime and knocking off the villain, and being the savior of the city.” When he was nine, James moved in with Frank Walker, a local football coach, and his family, who offered a more stable home environment until James’s mother could get on her feet.⁵⁰ Walker introduced James to the game of basketball, with success quickly following. Over the course of his career at Akron’s St. Vincent–St. Mary High School, James won three Ohio Mr. Basketball awards and helped his team win three state championships. A local cable company hosted a pay-per-view channel for his high school games until ESPN started broadcasting major games during James’s senior year.⁵¹

In 2002, *Sports Illustrated* featured the high school junior on its cover as the top high school basketball player in the country under the banner headline “The Chosen One,” a religious framing that imbued James with superhuman powers, and, soon thereafter, the teenager had the phrase tattooed across his back.⁵² James also explicitly connected himself to Christ in talking to the media while still in high school when he stated, “Jesus Christ made me famous. None of you all made me famous.”⁵³

After James decided to forego college to enter the NBA draft, fate finally seemed to intervene favorably for Cleveland as the Cavaliers acquired the first draft selection in the annual lottery. The answer to the “curse” was clear: LeBron James, Northeast Ohio’s native son, would win Cleveland its long anticipated sports championship, and he struggled mightily to fulfill that goal. James won a Rookie of the Year award and two Most Valuable Player awards, even as the Cavaliers lost each year in the playoffs.⁵⁴

Beyond his basketball performance, James’s rhetoric—from his public comments to his ritualistic chalk toss before each game to a new “King James” tattoo that he added in his first year in the NBA—continued to convey a messianic image.⁵⁵ Nike advertisements for James also used Chris-

tian themes to depict him as a quasi-religious figure who would unselfishly sacrifice for the team, be it the Cavaliers or Northeast Ohio, and lead Cleveland to the Promised Land. In “The Book of Dimes” commercial, for example, a black minister (Bernie Mack) reads to his congregation from the “King James playbook,” a reference to both James and the King James Bible. Mack then preaches about “Basketball’s Chosen One” and, as a choir sings, James arrives and begins “dropping dimes” or providing assists so that others can successfully make baskets, allusions that were religious and simultaneously suggestive of how James would enable others—be they teammates or community members—to succeed.⁵⁶ Likewise, in “Witness,” fans who had known James growing up talked about how “the Creator” had made James with “these legs” and “these arms” and how they were “witnesses” to James’s greatness.⁵⁷ Nike’s continuing tagline for his advertisements, “We Are All Witnesses,” reflected fans’ hopes quite well, while evoking the public affirmation of religious conviction. All in all, James’s messianic image was, as Mocarski and Billings argue, a co-construction of James’s words and actions and Nike’s advertising as well—we might add—of media coverage.⁵⁸ From a postsecular perspective, this creation reflected quite clearly the ways in which capitalism, religion, and sport interact.

Off the court, James demonstrated that his bonds with Northeast Ohio were not just about basketball. He and his mother created the LeBron James Family Foundation (LJFF) in 2004—when he was not yet 20 years old—with a focus on assisting children and single-parent families in need. Toward that end, James and LJFF built playgrounds in economically underprivileged communities in Akron, hosted an annual bike-a-thon there to raise money for the foundation and for groups like the Akron YMCA and the Akron Urban League, and sponsored Boys and Girls Clubs of America in the region and then across the country.⁵⁹

In 2010, however, James was at the end of his contract, and questions arose about whether he would return to the Cavaliers. Numerous teams vigorously recruited James. Back in Northeast Ohio, a representative of Cavaliers owner Dan Gilbert quietly coordinated with Ohio Governor Ted Strickland’s chief of staff on how the governor could best convey to James just “how important he is to Ohio.” Clevelanders for LeBron James also created a music video takeoff of “We Are the World” in which the governor, city and county officials, local celebrities, Cleveland media personalities, Slider (the Indians’ mascot), and a very uncomfortable looking U.S. Senator

Sherrod Brown all sang: “It’s a choice you’re making/You’re saving our downtown/And Cleveland’s a better place with you around./We say LeBron/We really need you.”⁶⁰ While their earned pessimism made Cavaliers fans worry, many still could not imagine James leaving. As recently as April 2010, he had declared, “I got a goal, and it’s a huge goal, and that’s to bring an NBA championship here to Cleveland, and I won’t stop until I get it.” Sportswriter Terry Pluto aptly summed up fans’ perspectives, again with religious overtones: “LeBron is God’s reward to Cleveland for suffering.”⁶¹ Even skeptical fans, however, were not prepared for what happened next.

On July 7, 2010—just six days after James became a free agent—Dwayne Wade and Chris Bosh, two other exceptionally talented players, publicly revealed that they would be members of the Miami Heat in 2010, while ESPN announced that it would air a one-hour special the following evening to cover James’s own decision. ESPN then heavily promoted *The Decision*, which heightened the event’s viewership. In a point often overlooked, James also bargained with ESPN so that corporate sponsorship of *The Decision* raised \$2.5 million for the Boys and Girls Clubs of Connecticut and advertising revenue contributed another \$3.5 million to youth charities.⁶² During *The Decision*, children from the Boys and Girls Club sat onstage as James announced: “I’m going to take my talents to South Beach.” He elaborated, “The major factor . . . was the best opportunity for me to win and to win now and win into the future also. Winning is a huge thing for me.” Not only did James’s words seem selfish and at odds with his prior rhetoric of religiosity, but also they came on national television and as a complete shock to the Cavaliers.⁶³

Cleveland sports fans were embarrassed and outraged: James had violated their faith in him. Around the region, fans publicly wept, while others angrily burned their #23 jerseys and destroyed posters and figurines of their former hero. Even in James’s hometown of Akron, minor league baseball fans at an Akron Rubber Ducks game booed when news of his departure was announced. The City of Cleveland, for its part, immediately removed the 100-foot billboard of James that had graced the downtown area. As Cleveland fan Earl Mauldin declared, “It was a slap in the face to the city who supported him and [has] been behind him since he was in high school. To go on national TV and spit in our face like that was very, very, very wrong.” Reverend Jesse Harris of Cleveland likewise declared James’s behavior “a disgrace.” Less than two days after *The Decision*, the Cavaliers’ organization

removed from its gift shop any item remotely associated with James. Reporter Tom Withers drolly noted, with a religious allusion, “This wasn’t a cleaning, it was a cleansing.”⁶⁴ Numerous fans, such as Phoenix Jones, emphasized what they saw as the hypocrisy of James’s decision: “How can you leave your own city in the dust? He has ‘loyalty’ and ‘family’ tattooed on him. His decision displays none of that.” Fans accused James of taking “the easy way out” by seeking a championship in Miami with Wade and Bosh, rather than continuing to labor for one in Cleveland. A fan from Canton, Ohio, explained, “We’re sitting on five decades of frustration. We haven’t won a championship since 1964. . . . Out of the streets of Akron comes this kid on his white horse to play for his hometown team, to lead us out of the darkness. ‘Hey, Cleveland, here’s your movie script. . . . Enjoy, because it’s got a happy ending.’ . . . No, it doesn’t.” While a young woman sadly told a local news reporter, “We’re all losing hope really fast,” most fans, in the words of a Cleveland news correspondent, were instead “angry they’ve been betrayed.”⁶⁵ The Chosen One had fallen from his pedestal.

Perhaps no one in Cleveland took *The Decision* harder than Cavaliers’ owner Dan Gilbert, however. In a post on social media, Gilbert attacked James as “our former hero, who grew up in the very region that he deserted this evening.” The owner angrily invoked the messianic language that had surrounded James by declaring that Cleveland and Northeast Ohio “don’t deserve this kind of cowardly betrayal” and “shocking act of disloyalty from our home grown ‘chosen one’” whose “heartless and callous action” would rightly lead to Cleveland’s curse going with him to Miami.⁶⁶

Soon after *The Decision*, Nike ran an ad called “Rise,” narrated by James, in which he provided no answers but instead posed questions to fans about what he should do in light of their anger over him leaving. “Rise” ended with: “Should I be who you want me to be?”—an allusion, perhaps, to Muhammed Ali’s famous declaration that “I don’t have to be what you want me to be.”⁶⁷ According to Mocarski and Billings, the commercial’s message was that “James is man enough to be who he wants to be without the influence of others,” but sendups of the ad mocking James quickly sprang up in response, with one fan parody transforming James’s Nike slogan of “Witness” into “Quitness.”⁶⁸ The messianic hero had abandoned his people or, as Joseph Campbell might put it, refused the call.⁶⁹

In May 2011, James finally apologized for *The Decision* after Miami’s Eastern Conference semifinal series defeat of the Boston Celtics, the team

that had handed Cleveland a humiliating loss in James's last playoff game with the Cavaliers in 2010. He commented to reporters, "The way it panned out with all the friends and family and fans back home, I apologize for the way it happened." Nonetheless, James added, "As much as I loved my teammates back in Cleveland, I knew I couldn't do it by myself against that team [Celtics]." ⁷⁰ While some welcomed his apology, most fans appeared unmoved. His words reinforced their perceptions that James had gone to Miami to find an easy way to win, rather than staying in Cleveland and working hard to earn a championship. While the expectation of personal sacrifice has largely disappeared from U.S. Christianity today, fans still often demand it in sport, whether in the form of long hours of practice or foregoing personal achievements for the sake of the team. ⁷¹ Cleveland fans still judged their former "Chosen One" as going to Miami to avoid sacrifice, and they also had not forgiven him for publicly embarrassing them. ⁷² To make matters worse, James would go on to win two championships during his four-year tenure with the Heat, while the Cavaliers continued to lose. ⁷³

James may have broken his ties of faith with Northeast Ohio in regard to basketball, but the personal connection he felt with the region was still there. According to Michele Campbell, the director of LJFF, James was "basically hated" in Northeast Ohio after leaving Cleveland, especially during his first year with the Heat. She added, however, "That year was the best thing that ever happened to the foundation, because it allowed him to grow as a philanthropist, sit back and learn what legacy he wanted to leave, what kind of difference he wanted to make." James quietly deepened and expanded his efforts in Akron to focus on education. ⁷⁴ He also kept his headquarters in Akron and never removed the city's skyline from his website. After winning his second NBA championship in 2013, James added two new tattoos: "Akron" and "Est. 1984." ⁷⁵ James was in the last year of his Miami Heat contract, and the question became: Can you go home again? James's open letter drew on religious rhetoric to help provide the way.

THE PRODIGAL SON RETURNS: JAMES'S OPEN LETTER IN *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED* AND FAN RESPONSE

When James decided to go back to Northeast Ohio, the LRMR Management Company—composed of James and three close friends from Akron—reached out to *Sports Illustrated* (SI) writer Lee Jenkins with the idea of a

“first-person ‘as-told-to’ essay” that would explain James’s return. Jenkins was an attractive choice because he had recently nominated James for *SI*’s Sportsman of the Year in an article that praised his leadership in the NBA, both on and off the court. Interestingly, Jenkins’s essay also used language of restoration and redemption that may have sounded appealing to James. Three years after *The Decision*, Jenkins noted that “the rehabilitation is complete”; he especially praised James’s outstanding philanthropic work on behalf of Akron school children as standing in “overwhelming contrast” to the lackluster efforts of other athletes. Jenkins declared, “He [James] is saving those who were not chosen.”⁷⁶ Beyond selecting Jenkins and *SI*—the sport news outlet that James and his advisors considered the most credible, especially after *The Decision* debacle with ESPN—they negotiated that the player would sit down for an interview with Jenkins and that James would get final approval of the piece.⁷⁷ The choice of an open letter format, especially under these conditions, gave James more control over his message than other options, such as a press conference, while also conveying the impression through its first-person narrative that James was engaging in direct interpersonal communication with fans, a style most appropriate for relational mending after his perceived sin.⁷⁸

The letter that *SI* released on its website and then published in its magazine was artfully written, yet also clearly reflected James’s own voice that was well known to anyone who followed professional basketball closely. In an era when popular culture often contains religious language and themes, the open letter drew upon a popular genre in traditional religious rhetoric, the parable, by strategically adapting the story of the Prodigal Son.

The parable of the Prodigal Son is well known, but a short summary before examining James’s adaptation should prove useful.⁷⁹ In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells the story to Pharisees and scribes of the religious establishment who disapprove of him associating with tax collectors and other perceived sinners. The parable is about the father of two sons, the youngest of whom asks for his inheritance early and then proceeds to leave home for a “far country,” where he spends all of his money on “riotous living.” When a famine strikes the region, the starving young man ends up as a destitute swineherd. He then realizes the error of his ways and heads home to admit his sins and to ask if he can become his father’s hired servant. When his father sees the son coming down the road, however, he runs to the lad, embracing him and kissing him. The young man protests that he is not

worthy to be called his father's son, but the father—contrary to all expectations—orders that the fatted calf be killed and a huge celebration be held for “this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.” Shortly thereafter, the eldest son discovers the festivities and becomes angry. In contrast with his brother who spent his inheritance on “harlots,” the eldest son tells his father, *he* had served his parent faithfully, yet the father had never thrown a party for *him*. The parable ends with the father reassuring the son “all that I have is thine” and encouraging him to join the celebration “for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.” The parable ends before the eldest son has decided what he will do, but the scripture clearly indicates that Jesus equated the Pharisees and scribes with the eldest son.⁸⁰ Through the story, Jesus conveys not only how God gives grace to human beings—rather than making them earn it—but also how human beings should treat one another.⁸¹

The parable of the Prodigal Son was an ideal vehicle for James to use in reframing his decision to leave Cleveland and in explaining his return. As a religious parable, the narrative was in keeping with the religious rhetoric that James had employed in the past and that others had employed to describe him. It also was a familiar story that would resonate with many people. The Prodigal Son had a number of parallels with James's situation that were rhetorically useful, as well. In the parable, the younger son is self-absorbed and pursues personal pleasure—not unlike perceptions of James's decision to leave Cleveland for Miami in search of championships. Just as the Prodigal Son's departure to another country suggested both his geographical and psychological distance from his family and community,⁸² James's move to Miami did the same. The Prodigal Son asked for his inheritance early, which, in biblical times, would have been an extremely humiliating act for his father—akin to wishing his father dead in a public way—while his flight from home also meant that the young man had refused the responsibility of caring for his father in old age.⁸³ Susan Eastman explains that by allowing his youngest son to “have power over him,” the father relinquished “his own status and honor in his culture,”⁸⁴ a state of affairs not unlike Northeast Ohio's mortifying loss of face on nationwide television at the rejection of their favorite son and would-be hero. Finally, the Prodigal Son is, at base, about the “restoration to relationship” and the “return to a place of belonging,”⁸⁵ a theme ideal for James's rhetorical efforts.

These parallels notwithstanding, some significant differences also existed. James had not ended up the equivalent of a lowly swineherd in Miami, for instance, but instead had accrued acclaim through both team championships and personal athletic accomplishments. Furthermore, the NBA standout had no remorse over his decision to leave, so he was unlikely to confess his departure as a sin, a point at odds with the revelation of the youngest son in the parable.

James glossed over these points, however, by adapting the parable in strategic ways that reframed his exodus from Cleveland and framed his return so as to restore his image and therefore his relationship with Northeast Ohio. From the start, James's open letter emphasized his filial bonds with the region in an image restoration strategy that Benoit would describe as bolstering or associating oneself with attributes that the audience already views positively.⁸⁶ James talked about himself as "a *kid* from Northeast Ohio," a region that has "a special place in my heart" and where "People have seen me *grow up*. I sometimes feel like *I'm their son*."⁸⁷ While the Prodigal Son of Luke returned home and immediately confessed his sins, James's rhetoric expressed a moment of insight that was different. He declared, "My relationship with Northeast Ohio is bigger than basketball. I didn't realize that four years ago. I do now."⁸⁸ Although James admitted to no sin, his words reflected a personal revelation about the importance of his ties with Northeast Ohio that was, nonetheless, in keeping with the parable. Luke 15:17 describes the young man's moment of insight as "And when he came to himself," a phrase that many have translated as meaning that he repented. The Prodigal Son did, indeed, confess his sins upon his arrival home, but his decision to return was based on something more fundamental, for Arland J. Hultgren notes that "Augustine—no stranger to the concept of repentance—wrote that the young man 'had gone away from himself and now 'he [returned] to himself (his prior state).'"⁸⁹ Just as the Prodigal Son's identity had been restored to its former character, LeBron James had recognized the significance of his shared identity with Northeast Ohio and sought to restore their relationship.

Nonetheless, James still had to deal with what Cleveland fans perceived as his sin—his exodus to Miami and the television special by which he announced his departure—even if he himself saw it differently. James recalled *The Decision*, although not by name, as "when I was sitting up there at the Boys & Girls Club in 2010,"⁹⁰ words that emphasized his ongoing

charitable activities, rather than reminding fans of how he had announced his decision to go to Miami as part of a much-ballyhooed event that humiliated them on nationwide television. James then stretched the Prodigal Son parable to suit his own purposes by admitting to mistakes, not sins, and making his decision to leave Cleveland seem more understandable by placing it in a different context: “If I had to do it all over again, I’d obviously do things differently, but I’d still have left. Miami, for me, has been almost like college for other kids.” He depicted the “past four years”⁹¹—a time period serendipitously parallel with the length of a college education—as a learning experience that had prepared him for his return home. According to James, “Without the experiences I had there [Miami], I wouldn’t be able to do what I’m doing today.”⁹² The player’s reflections suggested that he should have announced his departure in another way. Still, James offered no apology or explicit confession of sin—perhaps because he had already provided a *mea culpa*, albeit an awkward one, back in 2011 for the “way it panned out”—and continued to stand by his decision to leave. James also was careful not to rend his relationship with Miami, as he thanked the Heat “for giving me an amazing four years,”⁹³ a line that reinforced his claim that his time at Miami had been like going away to college.

Now, James explained, he wanted to return to “*our city*” to fulfill his original goal of “bringing one trophy back to Northeast Ohio. I always believed that I’d return to Cleveland and finish my career there. I just didn’t know when.”⁹⁴ Through his account, James portrayed himself as a loyal member of the community who had left the Cavaliers only to gain the skills necessary for winning the elusive championship that Cleveland “hasn’t had . . . in a long, long, long time.”⁹⁵ James’s discourse recontextualized his “sin” such that his departure from Cleveland had actually been for the greater good of the city, an image restoration strategy known as transcendence,⁹⁶ which was particularly compatible with the messianic rhetoric long associated with him.

James also subtly encouraged forgiveness on the part of fans. First, he noted that his wife and his mother had agreed to support his decision to return, even though the “letter from Dan Gilbert, the booing of the Cleveland fans, the jerseys being burned—seeing all that was hard for them.”⁹⁷ The two women had apparently forgiven Gilbert and fans for their behavior. Furthermore, James exemplified forgiveness himself while not fully conceding that the reactions to his 2010 departure had been difficult. He observed,

“My emotions were more mixed. It was easy to say, ‘OK, I don’t want to deal with these people ever again.’ But then you think about the other side. What if I were a kid who looked up to an athlete, and that athlete made me want to do better in my own life, and then he left? How would I react?”⁹⁸ James’s mention of Gilbert’s “letter”—rather than “attack”—and of fans’ actions in the context of the two women in his life served to remind readers of how James himself had been wronged, but without casting him as an object of self-pity. Meanwhile, his depiction of his own circumspect responses portrayed the player as judicious and forgiving, much like the father of the original parable. James also revealed, “I’ve met with Dan [Gilbert], face-to-face, man-to-man. We’ve talked it out. Everybody makes mistakes. I’ve made mistakes as well. Who am I to hold a grudge?”⁹⁹ In James’s rendering, angry fans and especially Dan Gilbert were the eldest sons who lashed out not when the Prodigal Son returned but when he left. James’s account served to minimize these sins by calling them “mistakes” that could be left in the past. Through his rhetoric, the athlete appeared magnanimous yet also brushed away remaining perceptions that he himself had sinned by acceding merely that he had made unspecified mistakes, too. James, the Prodigal Son, personified the grace of the father in the parable and demonstrated that at least one eldest son—Gilbert—had done so, too. What his open letter left unsaid was whether fans should or would follow suit.

James’s rhetoric also attempted to transform his relationship with Northeast Ohio in two basic ways. To begin, he altered his identity from a young favorite son to a mature adult leader. The open letter started by describing James as a “kid” who had sometimes found the “passion” of people in Northeast Ohio to “be overwhelming.”¹⁰⁰ Over the course of the letter, however, James evolved from a child into an adult. He credited Miami as the “college” where he “became a better player and a better man.” James then described how he was now married, with two sons of his own and a daughter on the way, and how “I started thinking about what it would be like to raise my family in my hometown.” The boy from Northeast Ohio was no longer a child, but a man. Indeed, James described his conversation with Gilbert as “man-to-man” and, in regard to the Cavaliers, asserted, “I see myself as a mentor now” who could “help elevate” the young players on the team.¹⁰¹ In sum, James now had the skills and maturity needed to live up to the expectations of Northeast Ohio. He said he could not promise a championship, but it remained a “most important” goal.¹⁰²

Beyond altering his identity from a homegrown kid to a fully grown man and leader, James's open letter transformed the nature of his commitment to the region from one primarily about basketball to one more broadly civic or even spiritual in nature. James, as noted earlier, had become more deeply involved in education philanthropy in the region even while playing for Miami and had stated early in his open letter that his "relationship with Northeast Ohio is bigger than basketball."¹⁰³ He returned to this theme at the close of his message by emphasizing that his decision to return was not about Cleveland's roster or the Cavaliers as an organization. Rather, James professed, "I feel my calling here goes above basketball. I have a responsibility to lead, in more ways than one, and I take that very seriously. My presence can make a difference in Miami, but I think it can mean more where I'm from. I want kids in Northeast Ohio, like the hundreds of Akron third-graders I sponsor through my foundation, to realize that there's no better place to grow up."¹⁰⁴ In this passage, James characterized his commitment to Northeast Ohio as spiritual, a "calling" rooted in "where I'm from," while his reference to LJFF reminded the audience that he may have left for a "far country" like the Prodigal Son of the parable but he had never rejected his responsibility to care for the people of Northeast Ohio. James closed his open letter by declaring, "In Northeast Ohio, nothing is given. Everything is earned. You work for what you have. I'm ready to accept the challenge. I'm coming home."¹⁰⁵ In this conclusion, James not only demonstrated that he shared the regional value of hard work and its religious implications of sacrifice as the only way to accomplish desired ends but also indicated that now—as a more mature, more skilled leader—he was prepared to answer the region's call and to assume the loftier responsibilities that leadership entailed. James's rhetoric recognized that God's grace might be freely given, but Northeast Ohio's forgiveness would demand a commitment to toil.

In the days following the release of his open letter in *SI*, residents of Northeast Ohio responded in ways that reflected the themes of his message. Akron area fans surrounded James's Bath Township home while fans in Cleveland congregated around the "Q" or Quicken Loans Arena. In both places, people donned old #23 jerseys or "Witness" shirts that had escaped the earlier conflagration and held supportive signs, such as "Welcome Home LeBron!" or "The King Has Returned" with the iconic Christic image of James throwing powder upward. Fans at these venues, as well as on social media,

reenacted this sacred ritual of the chalk toss as they welcomed the Chosen One home. Meanwhile, local merchants quickly made and sold their own t-shirts with phrases like “Witness the Forgiveness” or “FORGIVEN: The Kingdom Restored.”¹⁰⁶ Fans on social media created and shared favorable mashups that consisted of video footage of James—including sequences from Nike ads—often accompanied by singer Skylar Grey’s popular song, “Coming Home,” that she had adapted specifically in response to James’s return with the lines “I know that Cleveland awaits/And they’ve forgiven my mistakes.”¹⁰⁷

In media interviews and on social media, fans likewise affirmed that James had redeemed himself in their eyes, often reflecting the homage to hard work in James’s open letter and his explanation of the years spent in Miami as preparing him for the challenge of winning a championship in Cleveland. An Akron fan said, for instance, “You gotta forgive him. He didn’t have to do this. He coulda stayed there or went somewhere else and made it easier on himself.” Another noted that James “did what he had to do down in South Beach and [now] he can take his talents back up here to the north.”¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, Northeast Ohio fans adopted the Prodigal Son framework by praising James as “the prodigal King” and insisting that “We just want to embrace our prodigal son.”¹⁰⁹ Some residents referred specifically to the words of James’s open letter. For example, “blacksquirrel” on Cleveland.com wrote, “I was a doubter, and hater, and not about to forgive him for the insulting way he left. . . . [but] I got a tear when I read his *SI* essay. He’s reaching his hand out to us. He’s asking for forgiveness in the best way he can. . . . The man has matured, and I do mean ‘man.’ Welcome home LeBron.” Likewise, user *seattlecav* commented, “LeBron could not have written a more perfect essay. He said everything he needed to say.”¹¹⁰ Even two men who had previously received a great deal of attention for their especially flamboyant incineration of LeBron James jerseys and shirts welcomed the player back in a Cleveland television news story. As one explained, James “made a mistake, as did I by burning the jersey.” The two men referenced the open letter’s mention of the jersey burning and then performed a corrective ceremony in which a #23 jersey was pulled from cinders, still intact—the phoenix rising from the ashes as it were—while a group of fans and former jersey burners completed a chalk toss with confetti.¹¹¹ Cleveland attorney Eric Baisden summarized the situation well for a *Washington Post* reporter: “All is forgiven.”¹¹² Indeed, a Quinnipiac Uni-

versity poll revealed that the majority of the entire state's adult population had forgiven James for leaving Cleveland and approved of his return.¹¹³

James's "Chosen One" status seemed restored, perhaps reflected best in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer's* special issue that began with a full-page, black-and-white drawing of James in the midst of a Christic chalk toss as he looked piously upward at the word "Home" that was in large gold lettering, along with his name, which was in smaller print below, visually reflecting how James now prioritized the sacred community over himself. The drawing also included a quotation, in white lettering, excerpted from the open letter: "In Northeast Ohio, nothing is given. Everything is earned. You work for what you have. I'm ready to accept the challenge. I'm coming home."¹¹⁴ Northeast Ohio had embraced its Prodigal Son.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Our analysis of LeBron James has provided a case study of the postsecular approach for understanding the interactive relationship between religion and sport today. In James's open letter, he adapted the parable of the Prodigal Son to depict himself as the son of Northeast Ohio who had made mistakes, rather than sinned and, simultaneously, as the wise father who was forgiving of others. In James's narrative, his decision to leave for four years was actually a necessary step in gaining maturity as both a player and a man, yet—like the Prodigal Son—James admitted to a revelation about the deepness of his relationship with Northeast Ohio and recommitted himself to the community. Fan and media responses tended to reflect these religious themes in welcoming James home.

While our essay has focused on the way in which religious language shaped expectations and questions about moral integrity in Cleveland basketball, evidence suggests that LeBron James also may be influencing the rhetoric of institutionalized religion. Bishop Prince Moutry of Cleveland's East Side, for example, used James's return to interpret scripture in his homily, "Our Prodigal Son Returns Home," but pastors in places far from Ohio have also featured the player in a central role and then circulated their sermons on the web. Reverend John Rockhoff of Kansas has compared the attention that Jesus received to LeBron James's "witness campaign" as a way of understanding Jesus's popularity with the masses, and Missouri's Reverend Mark Meyers—in one of a series of sermons on NBA athletes—has

detailed the athletic and monetary value of James and then argued that God assessed humanity's value just as highly in sacrificing his only son.¹¹⁵ While just a sampling, these sermons suggest that religious leaders may increasingly be turning to sport as a way of engaging audiences and helping them to understand the potential transcendence of religion through that with which listeners may be more familiar: sport. A question that remains is whether the long-term adoption of this framework, with its focus on human accomplishment and celebrity, has the potential to denigrate the spiritual and nonworldly values traditionally upheld by religion.

In addition, our analysis indicates that a postsecular perspective may help to explain the depth of emotion that fans attach to sport today and the transcendent unity that sport may provide. Within the religious rhetorical framework associated with James, he was a young and talented homegrown "son" who offered a possibility for the entire region to find redemption. His decision to leave Cleveland therefore constituted a major sin, further exacerbated by an explanation that appeared hypocritical and that publicly rejected the region he called home. Fans responded with wounded anger and destroyed the religious relics connected with James. Conversely, his open letter brought redemption in the form of ecstatic responses and renewed faith. Although the religious motifs prevalent in rhetoric by and about James might constitute an extreme, the case also suggests that sport today provides moments of transcendence once reserved only for religion. The religious commitment and even *fanaticism* of sport may constitute another dimension of social contracts within that realm that are rhetorically constructed to induce, in Grano's words, "conformity to nonideal agreements." While Grano's research has examined the "unacknowledged race and class assumptions" that are an ongoing part of sport,¹¹⁶ we would add that the religious language and rituals of sport may explain other assumptions and agreements, as well. Scholars have puzzled, for example, over communities supporting financial deals with team owners that clearly disadvantage cities economically.¹¹⁷ However, religious adherence—and the emotions and identifications that go with it—can justify such decisions. From the perspective of athletes, the religious zeal of sport communities may create unattainable expectations for victory—after all, only one team can be the champion. And yet, in a postmodern world, sport offers the possibility of transcending differences—for instance, of race, class, and political affiliations—and uniting a community. Our study, of course, has

focused on an instance in which Christian motifs functioned in such a way. In future research, scholars might examine non-Christian religious frameworks in sport as well as the forms and influences associated with them. Regardless of the particular religious framework adopted and the overarching unity that sport may provide, we need to continue to remain vigilant in detecting any underlying problematic assumptions such unity may mask.

The case of LeBron James also reveals how the postsecular intersections between religion and sport are fostered not only through the rhetoric of individuals and news coverage but also through pervasive social media and commercial messages. It is worth noting that just a few months after his open letter, James again made use of advertising to sell products while also perpetuating his messianic image and demonstrating his commitment to Northeast Ohio. According to journalist Joe Vardon, James and his LRMR Management team have a reputation for choosing products for James to endorse and then influencing the approach taken in those commercials to emphasize the key attributes of the athlete's desired "brand" or image.¹¹⁸ Commercials for Beats by Dre, Sprite, and Nike in October 2014 certainly reflected this type of strategy, for they all fused words, visual imagery, and music in emotional messages that promoted products while celebrating James's homecoming in ways that underscored the religious and redemptive themes of his open letter. The Beats by Dre commercial, for example, includes narration by James's mother addressing her son about how "Akron is home. . . . the city that raised you" as well as footage that moves back and forth between images of the player's upbringing in Akron and images of his fierce workout at St. Vincent-St. Mary High School—with James wearing Beats by Dre headphones—as Hozier's song "Take Me to Church" plays. The commercial ends with the camera focusing on James's "Akron" tattoo; the athlete then groans and flips over a huge tire, symbolic of Akron's "Rubber City" moniker, with Hozier singing, "let me give you my life."¹¹⁹ Similarly, Sprite's "First Home Game" begins with James riding in a car as radio coverage talks about his upcoming first game with the Cavaliers, only to have it turn out that his actual first home game is watching children in Akron play on a newly refurbished basketball court with backboards and nets in Sprite colors. As kids excitedly greet him, James states, "They say home is where your heart is. My heart is here. It's always been." Imagine Dragons' upbeat song about redemption swells as the commercial closes.¹²⁰ Finally, the Nike ad "Together" has James in a huddle before a Cavaliers

game; he tells his teammates, “We gotta give it all we got. . . . Everything that we do on this floor is because of this city. We owe them.” Slowly, fans from the stands begin to join the team in the huddle, and then people from all over Cleveland surround the arena and fill the streets, their arms around each other. James leads them in a chant: “Hard work! Together!” A fleeting image of children waving from a school bus emblazoned with “The LeBron James Family Foundation” briefly appears before the commercial ends with James and everyone else raising their right arms in the air and, at James’s direction, shouting “Cleveland!” and then dropping their arms, as if at the completion of a religious ritual, while Nike’s “Just Do It” slogan appears.¹²¹ In all three cases, the spots were also released online so they could be shared via social media, which they were. A postsecular perspective on religion and sport recognizes the ways in which messages like these simultaneously attempt to sell products, promote James, reinforce the messianic rhetoric associated with him in the past, and demonstrate his commitment to home. In these messages, one may glean glimpses of what Denise M. Bostdorff and Steven L. Vibbert referred to as “values advocacy” rhetoric that can serve multiple purposes within corporate advertising, both potentially good (promoting community ties) and bad (promoting a product to kids like Sprite that is full of empty calories).¹²² Future scholarship would do well to investigate further the role that advertising plays in shaping religious views of sport as well as the ethical questions such advertising may pose.

Finally, our analysis of LeBron James indicates that the language of religiosity in sport has the capacity to create community obligations that go beyond sport. For instance, James has demonstrated a genuine commitment to young people, particularly those in his hometown. The LJFF created a mentoring program in 2010 that targets at-risk children starting in the third grade and offers incentives for parents to become involved. While it is too early to know how many of the 1100 students currently enrolled will graduate from high school, fourth and fifth graders in 2014 showed a more than 30 percent improvement in their reading scores. James regularly sends personal and group messages to participants through social media, shows up for program events, and demonstrates the importance of giving back to the community through, for example, his work in housing restoration and with the Boys and Girls Clubs.¹²³ In August 2015, he announced that students who graduate from his program and who fulfill criteria in relation to GPA, attendance, and community service will have scholarships to earn

their college degrees at the University of Akron. He also expanded his program to help the parents of enrolled children earn their GEDs. James carries out his mentoring and college scholarship program with the assistance of community volunteers, dedicated education professionals, and also corporate sponsors like Samsung and Nike.¹²⁴ In June 2016, James's perspective on the ties that bind him to his Northeast Ohio community were reflected in his response to the death of Muhammed Ali. James told reporters, "People forget what you did as a professional. . . . People forget the championships and all the other things you were able to accomplish. But they will never forget how you made them feel. That's a Maya Angelou quote, but I'll transcend that into what Muhammad Ali was able to do."¹²⁵

James's point notwithstanding, his full redemption as an athlete took place on June 19, 2016, when he secured his place among the pantheon of Cleveland sports gods. James and the Cavaliers defeated the Golden State Warriors, defending champions and winningest single-season team in NBA history, in a dramatic seventh game. The Cavaliers became the first team ever to come back from a 3-1 deficit in the championship series to win. For his part, James was named the unanimous MVP after leading all players in five statistical categories: points, rebounds, assists, steals, and blocks.¹²⁶ At the conclusion of the game, James collapsed to the floor in tears. When asked why he cried for this championship game but not his previous two in Miami, James replied, "This is different. . . . This is home."¹²⁷ Two days later, 1.3 million people, three times the population of the city of Cleveland, turned out for the Cleveland Cavaliers' victory parade. The "curse" had been lifted, and Cleveland declared itself a "City of Champions." In the end, one must recall that the root of the word *religion* is *religare*: to bind.¹²⁸ On that day in Cleveland, Ohio, a sports team united its community in celebration. There were no whites or blacks, Democrats or Republicans, rich or poor—only wine and gold Cavalier fans. It was a hometown communion of the faithful to celebrate a renewal of sport, spirit, and community, down by the Cuyahoga River.

NOTES

1. Jeff Zillgitt, "Cavaliers Fans Ready to Vent as LeBron James Returns," *USA Today*, December 2, 2010, https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/sports/basketball/nba/cavaliers/2010-12-01-lebron-james-cleveland-cavaliers-miami-heat_N.htm.

2. LeBron James as told to Lee Jenkins, "I'm Coming Home," *Sports Illustrated*, July 11, 2014, <https://www.si.com/author/lebron-james-lee-jenkins>.
3. Lee Jenkins, "Back to the Future," *Sports Illustrated*, July 21, 2014, 38–40; Howard Carter, "A Few Words with Fans: LeBron James's Welcome Home Celebration," *Stories of Akron*, August 14, 2014, <http://akronist.com/words-fans-lebron-james-welcome-home-celebration/>; Joe Gabriele, "Rubber City Royalty," *National Basketball Association*, August 8, 2014, <http://www.nba.com/cavaliers/news/features/lebron-akron-140808>; and "Return of 'The King,'" *Fox News 8*, Cleveland, Ohio, August 8, 2014, <http://fox8.com/2014/08/08/ready-to-party-fans-line-up-hours-before-lebrons-big-welcome-home-celebration/>.
4. In Akron, people were aware of James's philanthropy, and many of those who directly benefited still appeared to support him, but he was viewed hostilely by Northeast Ohio in general. Fans chanted "Akron Hates You!" at his first Cleveland game with the Heat. "LeBron James Thanks City of Cleveland One Month After Leaving for Miami Heat," *New England Sports Network*, August 7, 2010, <https://nesn.com/2010/08/lebron-james-thanks-city-of-cleveland-one-month-after-leaving-for-miami-heat>; and Mike Wise, "Unpopularity Contest," *Washington Post*, December 4, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/12/03/AR2010120306949.html>.
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7. Jeffrey Scholes and Raphael Sassower, *Religion and Sports in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 148–50.
8. Scholes and Sassower, *Religion and Sports in American Culture*, 9. Also see Bryan S. Turner, “Post-Secular Society: Consumerism and the Democratization of Religion,” in *The Post-Secular in Question: Religion in Contemporary Society*, ed. Philip S. Gorski, David Kyuman Kim, John Torpey, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 135, 138–39, 142–43, 150–54; and Conrad Ostwalt, *Secular Steeples: Popular Culture and the Religious Imagination* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), 25–26, 29–30.
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