

Decoding Human Behaviours

The Devotion of Football Fans

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Abstract

Professional football has unchained passions for many decades and the countries that are not affected by this phenomenon are rare. International competitions, as well as national championships, incite the passion within football fans, who also are consumers of the products that derive from the clubs' merchandising strategies. Professional football has progressively become a powerful entertainment industry, extensively examined by numerous economic and management studies, but that has not given rise to in-depth research on the mystical devotion that fans demonstrate towards their favourite club. The aim of this research note is to underline in what way the football passion resembles a religious experience. A reading grid showing the four pillars of the main monotheist religions –the Community, the Law, the Way and the Experience– is used in order to underline how football fans undergo a sacred experience.

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1 Introduction

During the election of the Pope Francisco in March 2013, social networks showed, surprisingly, that the Holy Father has a very human passion, football, and is a loyal *socio* of the Argentine San Lorenzo club. Via Internet, a picture of the Pope Francisco wearing a scarf of his favourite club went around the world in a matter of hours. An amazing image for those who, for many years, have considered that football can be seen as a kind of religion, because of the quasi-mystical infatuation of its most faithful supporters with their favourite team.

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Some fans even ask for their ashes to be scattered over the field after their death, while others are buried wearing their team jersey. While it is frequently said that football is acquiring a “religious” dimension, comments usually go no further. By using reading grid on the fundamentals of religious belief, we wish to show that professional football is accompanied by mystical devotion close to religious practice. The idea is to suggest that while religions essentially rely on notions of belonging or connection or relation coming from the Latin root *obligare* [16], the same basis seems to bind the most fervent supporters. The strong relationship maintained with their favourite team leads them to build a shared cultural identity with its own rules and values.

The purpose of this research note is to offer an original interpretation of an entertainment industry receiving high media coverage. According to many, often critical, observers [3], professional football has become a religion, and the fans’ devotion is too often without any limit, including concerning the violence practised to defend a territory. In a more pacific manner, the expression of the passion for a club can translate through the purchasing of jerseys, scarves or other products. This behaviour is nonetheless of symbolic nature, in order to show the group the membership to the values: for some, it is this that gives football a *sacred* character, justifying the purchasing of objects of cult [7]. Confirming that supporters develop a quasi-mystical passion *vis-à-vis* their favourite club is thus often presented as an indisputable reality, and Edge [9] maps out the way: baptism, indoctrination, confirmation, communion, confession, penance. Beyond journalistic remarks on football as a religion, we suggest the use of a reading grid of the four pillars of monotheist religions in order to understand better how the football passion is a true sacred experience for the most relentless fans. This research note aims at contributing to a better knowledge of human behaviours, while escaping the *iron cage of rationality*.

2 At the Roots of Football: Political Powers and Religion

For football historians, the football is of Anglo-Saxon origins [17, 22]. Various legends have spread regarding its first appearance. The tradition dictates that in Kingston-on-Thames, and similarly in Chester, the first game was played with the head of a beheaded prince that had been carried in a triumphal cortege. Football fever mode was to strike with a particular impetuosity in England during the Elizabethan era; this enthusiasm was equally strong in Italy during the Renaissance. In this country, particularly in Florence [2], the *calcio* developed during the XVIth and XVIIth centuries, a typically Italian game inspired from the famous French “*soule*”. The “*soule*” ball game, played between two teams of a same village or of a same parish, consisted in bringing the ball to a given place (see Figure 1). The confrontations, where there were practically no rules, produced fights leading to injuries or deaths [21], which was not the case with *calcio*, where rules were better established. The *calcio* took place during large celebration events and the games were used to mark the territories of political powers.



Figure 1: The “soule” in Normandy (France)

Source: *L'Illustration*, February 28, 1852

All things considered, during many centuries, the development of football underwent no improvements in its rules. Admittedly, this sport, that had been prohibited and highly controlled by political and/or religious authorities during a hundred years, had not managed to be completely eliminated, it remained however rough and brutal. Around the XIXth century a deep rupture appeared: football in schools, and particularly in the famous English *public schools*, became extremely popular [14]. It is in this framework that the sport was renewed and refined, including football tactics [17], but the game in itself remained relatively lacking in rules as before, it had no normalised form in the various places where it was played. On the contrary, each *public school* had its own version of the only legitimate way of playing, each adorning strong technical differences compared to the others. In the city of Rugby, in 1846, were finally settled, on a mandatory basis, the first rules of the modern football.

In 1871, eight years after the founding of the English football federation, it already comprised of fifty clubs. During the same year was organised the first ever football competition: the Football Association Challenge Cup, launched 17 years before the league Championship. Football grew rapidly, attracting a large number of spectators. Also, it came across problems that other countries were only to deal with much later, in particular that of professionalism. The first signs of this date back to 1879, with the remuneration of two players in a small club in Lancashire. The multiplication of equivalent cases were to force the English football federation to officially legalise professionalism in 1885, opening the path to a national and then international stardom for late Victorian and Edwardian professional footballers [25]. During the XXth century, football was to undergo a continuous and irrepressible expansion leading it today to a larger number of countries affiliated to the FIFA than of countries recognised by the UN, as we often like to underline.

3 From Economy to Religiosity

Each week, millions of individuals across the world kick a ball, improvising a football game with friends after a day's work, or participating in a meeting of an obscure *amateur* championship in the countryside close to Milan. But football is also and mostly an entertainment industry where economic stakes become crucial. Thus, Manchester United signed a 450-million-euro sponsoring contract with Nike, which durably shelters it from any sport misfortune. As for TV rights, they have shot up within a few years to the extent that professional football and its stars attract an increasing number of viewers (that are also potential consumers). The Barcelona FC has, for example, granted its TV rights to the company Mediapro for seven successive seasons for one million euros, whereas the TV rights for the English Premier League, certainly the football championship with the highest level of game on the planet, have skyrocketed since 2001, in particular on foreign markets. The soaring is not close to stopping as the English Premier League TV rights have increased again by 71% for the 2013-2016 period compared to 2010-2013.

In brief, professional football has become a veritable entertainments industry with major economic, financial and commercial issues [18]. But this industry is not like others. While takings from stadium attendance represent an increasingly smaller part of the major European clubs' budgets, at the expense of TV rights sales and commercial/merchandising (see Figure 2), the most fervent supporters have become essential for creating positive dynamics to reinforce the clubs' brand image and thus strongly increase the income resulting from the sales of TV rights. Famous clubs such as the Real Madrid, Manchester United or the Olympique de Marseille rely on the keen interest of people during matches to benefit from considerable media and financial results. Fanatic supporters bring a small contribution to the *stricto sensu* financial resources of their clubs, but they make up in mystical devotion, particularly through vows of loyalty, and thus create value for the clubs. While professional football is examined in marketing and strategic management studies uniquely from an economic and financial perspective, it is important to underline that it is also (first and foremost) a religious experience for the fans.

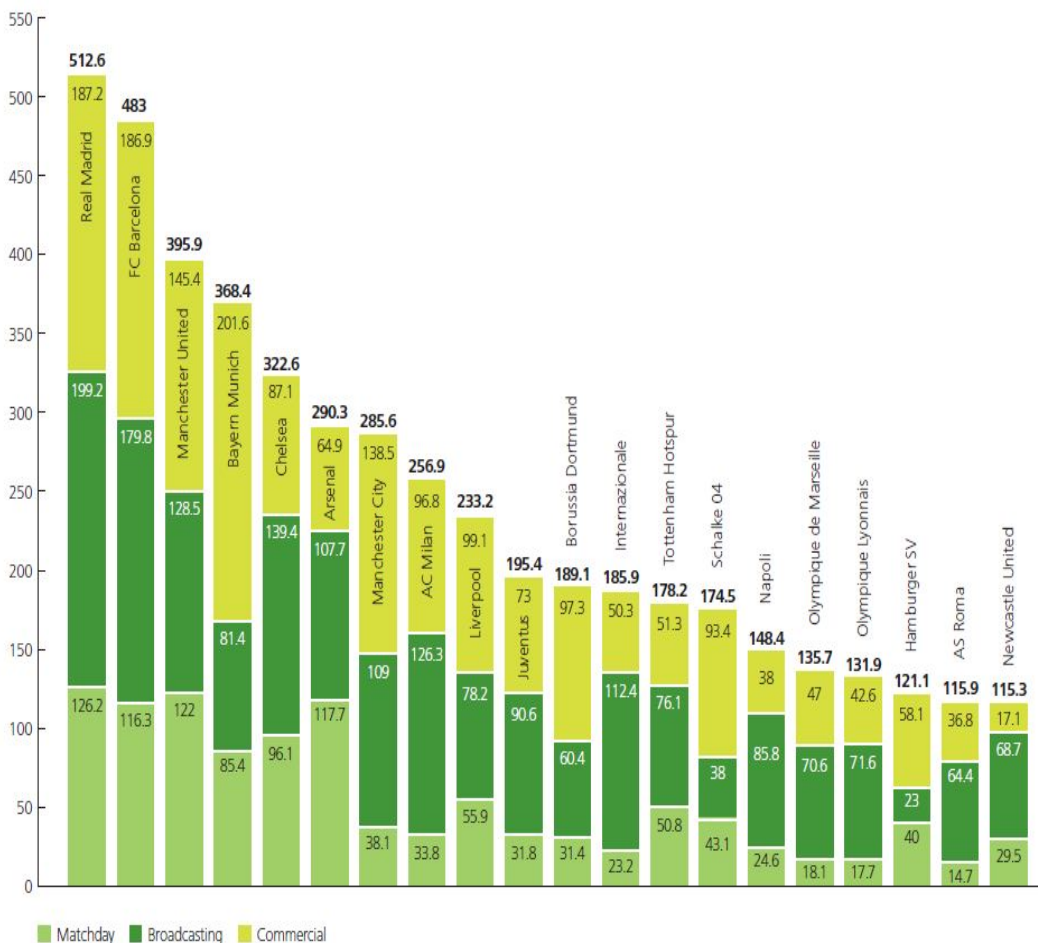


Figure 2: 2011/12 revenues by streams (€m) for the main European football clubs
 Source: Deloitte (2013)

Thus, Richardson [19] described the conversion of an individual into a football club fan as a *quasi-religious experience* leading to the entry into a community, of which ultimate mission is precisely to maintain the fans' sense of sacredness. It results in a certain number of rituals seeking *in fine* to maintain, come hell or high water (for example, in case of defeat or worse, demotion in an inferior division), the sacralisation of allegiance to its favourite club. The conversion process is based on several factors of uneven importance, but in which mixing is vital: the presence of the Gods (the players as idols to adore), as well as the sacred tribe of fans, a place of cult with highly symbolic dimensions (the stadium), and the atmosphere which enables the accomplishment of ecstatic experience of sharing between members of a community. In his study of human behaviours, Richardson [19] evokes a notion of "massive energy" that the crowd at a football match is capable of generating collectively, and that can be compared to some exacerbated demonstrations of mysticism in certain religions. This massive energy "*provides transcendent, sacred experience, and it is perceived by participants as being produced by themselves*" [19:13-14]. In a way, the stadium becomes a temple where faith in a team is practised through extremely codified allegiance rituals (belligerent songs, choreography, tribal dances, use of flags, etc.).

4 The Four Pillars of Religious Belief

Can a football stadium be compared to a temple? Such a view is not new and the reference to the Gods or Idols of sport could testify to its permanence over time. We might add that the issue of interactions between economic activity and religion is widely discussed for several years [13]. Beyond the popular image, we should try to understand how professional football has acquired a religious dimension. Before doing so, it is indispensable to determine the characteristics of religious beliefs in the framework of world monotheist religions that account for nearly four billion believers throughout the world. They were defined by Meslin [15] then by Basset and Gisel [1], and summed up by Fulconis *et al.* [10] through notions of Community, Law, the Way and Experience:

- *The Community: a group of sharing persons.* The Community illustrates both the collective and institutional dimension of any religious life. It requires some degree of internal organisation with the determination of a frontier between its members and those outside [1]. The Community refers to Lactancius's and Tertullian's approach explaining the Latin *religio* by the verbs *ligare*, *religare*, to belong, to connect. Religion defines a belonging, the purpose of which is the relationship maintained with the divine. Durkheim [8] conceived of a veritable transcendence by means of which individuals surpass themselves into a social fusion, into a "conscience of consciences", in contrast to the full possession of individual liberties.
- *The Law: rules and control.* The Law is the founding principle of religions; taught and presented as a rule of life, it is given to be transmitted. It comes from the other etymological origin of the word religion, *relegere*, supported by Cicero, meaning rereading, learning by heart. To start with, rules are subjective measures accepted and followed by believers, but they evolve into institutions and are respected both in the celebration and ceremony of the cult and rites. The Law takes the form of a fundamental differentiation between the secular and the sacred, the pure and the impure, the natural and the supernatural, the relative and the absolute, the temporal and eternity, the here below and the hereafter, etc. [1].
- *The Way: a shared mission.* The Way, that is found in the Chinese Dao, in the Ways of the Lord of the Hebraic Bible, in the Way of the Gospel according to John, or in the right Way of the Moslems' surat Fâtiha 1.7, combines a vision of the world and a ritual or ethical commitment to produce a dynamics. In the religious vocabulary, the Way shows the link between ideas and actions, and the historical dynamics characterising each tradition [1]. The Way seems to stem from the *religio* etymology already mentioned, and from *legere*, to gather, to collect. Believers are called to act by gathering and collecting. In other words, the Way can be understood as a mission, a shared intent, a motivation, or also a breath.
- *The Experience: an exaltation of the self.* Generally singular and innovative (prophetic inspiration, mystical union, divine apparition, adoration, fulfilled duty, conversion, mission, etc.), the Experience is an individual acquisition [6]. In western societies, adherence to a religion becomes a way of communicating and to mediating on our everyday life directed in its principles and practices by the perception of a radically different supra-natural reality beyond scientific reasoning. All societies establish themselves and endure by exalting themselves (they commemorate and celebrate their collective memory), and above all, by rising above and surpassing themselves.

5 Human Behaviours in the Football Context

Reading or hearing about professional football resembling a religion has become very common in mass medias, that resort to a religious terminology to celebrate the *high mass* such as the World Cup, to refer to a centre forward who *crucified* the opponent team, or to evoke a goal keeper performing *miracles* by saving its teams from defeat. Beyond simple figures of style, the frequent allusions to professional football in reference to a sort of post-modern liturgy certainly refers to a genuine experiential approach, Richardson's "fan conversion experience" [19], that greatly oversteps the economical vision of the professional football industry. The four pillars of the world's monotheist religions constitute a reading grid allowing to progress in our knowledge of human behaviour:

- *The Community*. The famous song of the Liverpool FC supporters unambiguously illustrates the melting of individuals into social fusion: "*You'll never walk alone*". To be a fan, through membership of a supporters group, means cultivating the certainty of belonging to a community taking precedence over individuality. A club represents a transcendence built on high feats of glory or, more exactly, on founding myths associated with epic victories and/or glorious players. Religious devotion is such that a defeat, in the eyes of fanatic supporters, may become a legendary epic reinforcing the community spirit. For a great many years, the defeat of the Saint-Etienne team, during the 1976 European Cup final, contributed to the lasting maintenance of the nation-wide myth of the "*Verts*", going beyond the club's city of origin.
- *The Law*. Research conducted in France by Bromberger [5] and Roumestan [20] on the structuration of Olympique de Marseille supporter groups clearly demonstrate the existence of initiation rites of allegiance to the Community: rites of aggressive support of the team, and also rites of celebration of victories, rites of defence of the "territory" against groups of rival supporters, or worse, against groups of supporters of opposing teams. To transgress the Law, to cross the border between the pure and the impure (for instance, for a young man to have a love relation with a young woman from a rival group of supporters), equals abandoning the faith and falling under the threat of excommunication. New member's integration rites to a group (community) of supporters go back to an equivalent logic, for example with the active participation in the match ceremonial.
- *The Way*. Sharing a faith and above all keeping it for life: this is the *credo* of any passionate supporter. In spite of the adversity of defeat, or worse, demotion to a lower division, confronted to the jeers of the opposing team's supporters or the press, passionate supporters feel invested with a mission, to defend their club come hell or high water, accepting Martyrdom if need be. Better still, such a defence is a life-long undertaking, because, as Nick Hornby described in his novel *Fever pitch* [12], passionate fans develop a mystical devotion for *one* club only, they take vows of chastity against the sirens supporting other teams, whatever the ups and downs in their existence, such as moving away from their home ground. The ultimate mission is to convert one's children and it is common to see successive generations attending the same "temple" (stadium): "*inclination for one team is a symbolic capital that overall is transmitted from father to son*" [4:107].
- *The Experience*. For passionate fans, living and attending every match of their favourite team equals sharing a unique and highly emotional experience, getting away from the real world for a while to reach a supra-natural dimension. Numerous ethnographic studies have underlined how very ordinary individuals can, for better or sometimes for

worse, be transported out of themselves in the course of a sports event and feel carried away by mystical exaltation [5]. This sometimes explains the surprise in discovering that the *hooligans* responsible for unheard of violence are often good family men respected by their neighbours. But we shouldn't feel surprised... Cannot attendance to a football match as a unique experience be compared in the end with a kind of "cosmology episode" in Weick's sense [23], with a collapse of everything that makes sense in everyday life?

Professional football as an economic activity is of strong random dimensions to the extent that the success of a club is linked to sports parameters only partly controllable. Despite the efforts to build a competitive team, history is full of examples of clubs being demoted to an inferior division, like Leeds United in the United Kingdom; on the contrary, less prestigious clubs, but capable of inspiring a collective dynamics to its players, have obtained surprising results, for example a qualification for a European championship. And yet, as part of the entertainment industry, football is seeking for stability in order to pay off the investments thanks to a constant flow of takings. It is clear that the stability is obtained as soon as the human behaviours of football fans are channelled independently of results obtained on the pitch. In other words, the fans' loyalty should be acquired by basing itself on a quasi-mystical devotion to the favourite club, including in case of huge distance to the "temple". To show their affiliation to their "church" at distance, the purchase of objects of cult, such as scarves or jerseys, then becomes essential, as well as very lucrative for the club. As Derbaix *et al.* [7:515-516] underline, "*while sharing the same colors and the same devotion to their team, fans also try to outdo the other supporters of their community by their external appearance and paraphernalia... Colors and scarves are not used for utilitarian or hedonistic purposes but for their symbolic meanings*".

6 Conclusion

As Giacalone [11] congratulates himself in his editorial, the study of management, spirituality and religion has henceforth opted for a behavioural dimension that succeeds in breaking loose from unscientific advice masquerades opinions to build a solid knowledge corpus. The focus of media attention on the growing presence of followers of the new age and of the Age of Aquarius could raise fear of the most eccentric abuses in the name of post-modernism. By comparing professional football with a religion, the risk of leading to a series of banalities related to the fans' sacred experience was important, and using the metaphor as single system of thought. In order to avoid this, we have chosen to base ourselves on a reading grid of the main monotheist religions in reference to the four complementary pillars: the Community, the Law, the Way and the Experience [10]. This research note brings no definitive answer concerning the validity of the reasoning; it simply indicates that human behaviours, in the framework of an "ordinary passion" as is football, can be better clarified using an original framework stemming from studies led in theology and sociology.

The managerial implications for the owners of professional football clubs are very important. Indeed, if the fans demonstrate a mystical devotion for their club based on the four identified pillars (the Community, the Law, the Way and the Experience), they will be less sensitive to deceiving sports results and/or to the departure of an idol (emblematic player) at the end of the season; they will continue to have faith in their church, by defending it against the attacks from other churches (other rival clubs). This would

therefore tend to show the pertinence of studies on the marketing of professional football clubs that underline how important it is to transform them in very powerful brands that are durable to sport ups and downs [18]. A remaining challenge will be to channel human behaviours in order to prevent the infamous abuses of football, such as violence, racism and ostracism, of which the psychological consequences are known [24], in altering, or even destroying, the brand value, in particular for powerful media at the source of broadcasting rights. In the case of the major national European football leagues, they have increased from an average 22% in 1996 to 48% in 2012, and we can imagine their dramatic influence on the sustainable governance of professional clubs.

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