

The Church of Baseball

By Terrie Dopp Aamodt

So what is this connection between baseball and religion? Is it a neat but pointless allegory? Is it a profane comparison? Was Annie Savoy (Susan Sarandon's character in the film *Bull Durham*) sacrilegious when she confessed, "I've tried 'em all, I really have. And the only church that truly feeds my soul—day in, day out—is the Church of Baseball."

The notion has crept from popular culture into academia, most notable recently in a collection of scholarly essays entitled, *The Faith of 50 Million: Baseball, Religion, and American Culture*.¹ In an introductory chapter, Christopher H. Evans identifies the game as an aspect of civil religion: At the center of baseball's symbolic power resides a unique language of civil religion, proclaiming that the game can redeem America and serve as a light to all nations.²

Baseball, long associated with American dreams and American exceptionalism, according to this line of reasoning, logically partakes of the religious values and assumptions underlying these ideas. Various scholars have earnestly pointed out that baseball was part of an early twentieth-century Progressive social gospel that sought to redeem the benighted residents of large cities by providing them with a bit of bucolic rural landscape: the downtown baseball "park."

Baseball has been saddled with lofty expectations, with the belief that the sport is and ought to be pure, free of the taint of gambling or steroid use, filled with generosity and good sportsmanship.

If baseball has failed to live up to its own requirements, lapsing instead into greed and the exclusion of women and blacks from the sport, it deserves redemption, according to Eleanor J. Stebner and Tracy J. Trothen. It could be purged of masculine preening and the unholy striving for individual glorification by returning to its roots as a team sport: "baseball—both as a sport and as a dominant cultural myth—needs to be liberated from the gloves of patriarchy . . . [baseball can be] a radically inclusive community."³

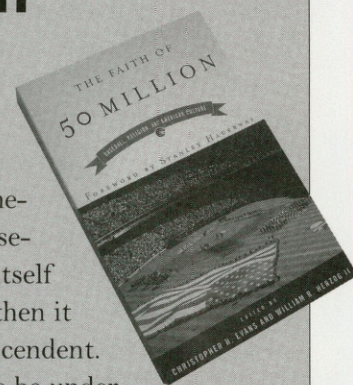
Evans and Herzog note that by being properly

humble and chaste, baseball can be redeemed from its sometimes errant ways: "When baseball has been able to awaken itself to its own fear of the future, then it has reflected something transcendent. For whether a means of grace be understood as bread and wine, or a bat and a ball, it enables us to cast away our fear of the unknown and momentarily see signs of hope for a better future."⁴

Although Evans and Herzog do not say it directly, the suggestion here is that baseball can serve a millennial purpose. A combination of high expectations and the hope for millennial improvement just around the corner encourages some individuals to see a future brighter than the present.

Too much talk or thought, though, can ruin a good game of baseball. After all, it is "just" a game (a high compliment). It is uniquely equipped to be enjoyed at any age level, any skill level, with a minimum of equipment and folderol. It is a team sport in which the whole can be greater than a sum of the parts. It appeals to the imagination and the medium of radio.

Baseball is best played outdoors, in spring or summer sunshine. It can be healing. It can be a blessing. But if it is elevated to the status of religion, it becomes the worship of a false god. As much as we are tempted to encrust it with mythology, it is still "just" a game, a splendid game. When executed at its exemplary best, it has something to teach all of us.



Notes and References

1. Edited by Christopher H. Evans and William R. Herzog II (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002).
2. "Baseball as Civil Religion: The Genesis of an American Creation Story," in *Faith of 50 Million*, 15.
3. "A Diamond is Forever? Women, Baseball, and a Pitch for a Radically Inclusive Community," in *ibid.*, 168, 184.
4. "The Faith of Fifty Million: A Kingdom on Earth?" in *ibid.*, 220.