

THE PASSION OF THE CANADIENS ON THE RED LINE: BETWEEN FAITH AND IDOLATRY¹

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‘All the *loyal fans* of the *Sainte-Flanelle*, those who listen *religiously* to the hockey games of the Canadiens, hoped for a *miraculous* season, but it turned into a *calvary*, a *way of the cross*, a *descent into hell*. The *idols* played without *soul* and even though those who had their *baptism* in the National Hockey League struggle *body and soul* to remain *in the good graces* of the *Great Manitou*, they were sometimes *sacrificed* when they were forced to leave for other *heavens*. Jacques Martin’s job was *Herculean*. *Jesus Price* was *crucified*, *Brother André* was sent to *purgatory* and even Plekanec was *nailed* to the bench. Fortunately, Halak was a *saviour*, Pacioretty finally *exorcised his demons*, by *coming back from the dead* to *preach* by the example and play like a *god*. But there were no *miracle* solutions – goals do not fall from *heaven!* – and the coup de *grace* was losing against these *damned Devils*. This setback was almost a *death knell* for the hopes of *Glorieux*. Let’s hope that the break is *salutary*, that next year, we will be able to *praise* the players that they will finally bring home the *Saint-Graal*, the *silver chalice to the Mecca of hockey* and that they will appear in the *Temple of Hockey*, in the *pantheon of ice sports for eternity*. Inch’Halak!’

1. The Canadiens: A Religion in Quebec

This text made up almost completely of expressions found in the media – radio, television, newspapers,

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Internet sites – demonstrates, if proof was needed, that in Montreal and throughout Quebec, the Canadiens are not only a hockey club, not only an entertainment business, not only a cultural phenomenon, not only a social fact. For some people, in certain circumstances, it seems to fulfill the functions of a religion. But is it really? We need to carefully check the phenomenon against a definition of religion to see if the Canadiens meet the criteria. Religion is:

Human beings' relation to that which they regard as holy, sacred, spiritual, or divine.

Religion is commonly regarded as consisting of a person's relation to God or to gods or spirits. Worship is probably the most basic element of religion, but moral conduct, right belief, and participation in *religious institutions are generally also constituent elements of the religious life as practiced by believers and worshippers* and as commanded by religious sages and scriptures.²

The essential element of a religion seems to me to be this 'personal relationship with God, with gods or with spirits.' In the introduction to a collection that I co-edited on the theme of religion of the Canadiens, I concluded, a little too quickly, that what was lacking with the Canadiens team 'lacks a presumed and explicit reference to something ultimately transcendent – to a Divinity, whatever S/He may be' (Bauer and Barreau, 2009, p. 29; translation) I should have known that on questions of religion nothing is ever definitive. In fact, there are gods in hockey and the religion of the Habs is a way to relate to them.

1.1. The Gods of Hockey

When Francophone Quebecers comment on a hockey game, they all have the same curious habit of giving life to the puck. The puck hops, jumps and deflects on its own. In the end, the puck can roll in favour of either team.

While I do not want to put too much emphasis on this kind of expression – it could just be a cliché or a verbal tic – I would like to take it seriously and consider that, at least for sports journalists, the puck has 'her' own life. (In French, 'puck' is a feminine word.) There are times when 'she' is no longer under the players' control that 'she' is freed from the physical laws of gravity and friction. For example, when the puck deflects over the glass, it is always by accident. But what does that really mean? I can see only two possible answers: either the puck is acting independently, or else it is being manipulated by some superior power, destiny or the gods of hockey. And in Montreal, these gods have a name. They are

² 'Religion,' in the *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, www.britannica.com. My emphasis.

called the Ghosts of the Forum, the ghosts who were Howie Morenz, Maurice Richard, Patrick Roy and the fourteen other players that permitted the Canadiens to win its twenty-four Stanley Cups – all on its old rink in the Forum – and whose jerseys have been retired.

Think of what that implies! If the puck was animate, if it moved under the control of a superior being, then playing hockey would require more than talent, more than tough training and a healthy living (which is in a way the ‘moral conduct’ required by every religion), more than a wealthy franchise (which is the ‘religious institution’), and more than a generous owner, more than a sensible general manager, more than a competent coach, three kinds of ‘religious sages.’ All those human qualities would obviously be required. But they would not be enough!

And as proof, it is enough to remember that the same team, with the same players and the same coach, with the same equipment and in the same rink, can easily win one day and lose miserably the next. The glorious uncertainty of sport! If hockey gods exist, winning would require that the fans believe in their team whatever happens – their ‘belief’ – and that they watch the games – their ‘worship.’ But this alone would not make the Canadiens a religion. To win matches and trophies, the players, the coach, the leaders and the fans would have to maintain this ‘personal relationship with God, gods or spirits,’ celebrate a superior being that could be the puck itself (just think of the players or fans who carefully keep the puck of their first goal or of an important match), the Ghosts of the Forum or the god of any more traditional religion.

If the puck is considered to be alive or under the control of some more or less well-defined superior being, it is easy to understand the behaviour of players, coach, leaders and fans, their superstitions, their rituals, their prayers, even their obsessions. They try to control the puck, to make it ‘roll the right way’ – which is necessarily always the way they and their team want it to roll. They try to limit the unexpected, the unpredictable. They try to ward off evil spells and gain the favour of the superior being, *mysterium fascinans et tremendum*, fascinating and terrifying, like everything that is sacred. As in all rituals, they want to give a little in order to receive much more, according to the principle of *do ut des* or the gift and counter-gift (Van der Leeuw, 1938; Mauss, M., 1966).

1.2. State of Grace

As Jesus was transfigured, as mystics can attain ecstasy and epektasis, as Buddhists can reach Nirvana, as Hindus can merge with Shiva, players can be ‘in the zone,’ ‘catch a *bounce*’ and experience moments when everything works for them, and nothing seems impossible.

Patrick Roy (Saint Patrick in the religion of the Canadiens) experienced countless remarkable moments. But there was one that was really exceptional. On April 11, 1986, the goaltender was barely twenty years

old, playing his first season with the Habs. He was playing against the Rangers in Madison Square Garden in New York City, the third game of the Conference final. The game was tied 1-1 at the end of regulation time. During overtime, the young goalie stopped everything fired at him and the Canadiens won the game two to one. Roy will remember that game his whole life. Twenty-two years later, when the Canadiens were retiring his jersey, he said in an interview: ‘To be honest with you, the overtime was the best feeling I ever had. It happened a couple of times... But that night, somehow, I could do whatever I wanted. I think I could have left my net, and the guys would have still shot it at me. I’m joking, but I felt so good. I knew that nothing could get past me.’³

But grace touches not only the Habs’ goaltenders. Sometimes it also helps out other players. On 16 January 2006, the Washington Capitals were playing the Phoenix Coyotes. Alexander Ovechkin, Alexander the Great in NHL mythology, was twenty-one years old. This is important, because grace seems to love the innocence of youth. The Russian player got the puck at centre ice. He went to the right side, tried to return to the centre, going around a Coyotes defenceman. But his opponent resisted. Ovechkin skated past the net and fell down. He was on this back, his head away from the net. But he kept control of the puck. Blindly, with the end of this stick, he is able to push the puck behind his back and score a goal that no human being could have scored without the help of the hockey gods. They should have been credited them with an assist.

Patrick Roy and Alexander Ovechkin! It was almost bound to happen that I would mention a goalie and a top scorer. Not that they receive more grace than a defenceman and a referee, who also have their moments of grace—but because they make grace more visible, more obvious. Patrick Roy and Alexander Ovechkin. Talking about a goalie and a goal scorer also reminds us that in hockey, as if in any sport, the paradise of one player is the hell of another.

1.3. ‘Dipped Them in Holy Water’

When they comment on a lucky victory by the Canadiens, Quebecers sometimes use this rather crude expression. They say that the players ‘have dipped them in holy water.’ The pronoun ‘them’ does not refer here to either the hands of the players, nor to their feet, but to a more private part of their anatomy. The expression is very significant. It says a lot about the devotion Quebecers have for the Canadiens, since it refers to a typically Catholic devotion: dipping one’s fingers in the holy water before entering the church, for the purpose of sanctification and purification. Of course, applied to the Canadiens, it is just a metaphor. No one would dare imagine the players really doing what the expression suggests...

³ Roy, P., ‘NHL – 1 on 1 with Patrick Roy.’ Interview on the TSN network with Ray Ferraro, 22 November 2008.

But the expression reveals a very religious, very Christian and very Catholic way of thinking: there are wins for which players do not deserve all the credit; you can ask for God's help by performing certain rituals; therefore, when the Canadiens win an undeserved victory, it was with God's help; and to obtain God's help, the Canadiens have to perform the required rituals.

The expression defines the Habs' religion as Catholicism. It catholicizes the god from whom the fans of the Canadiens are expecting help, because he is the only god who will respond to such rituals. Of course, the fact that the religion of the Canadiens is marked by Catholicism is no surprise in a Quebec that was massively Catholic and still largely is, at least culturally.

1.4. Believing Against All Evidence to the Contrary

I will add one last indicator to show that the Canadiens are a religion. There was a time – from the fifties to the seventies – when the superiority of the Canadiens was not an act of faith but a well-established fact. Any reasonable person had to acknowledge that the Stanley Cup belonged in Montreal, where it came back almost every year. But times have changed! And since 1993, the Canadiens have failed, year after year, to bring home the cup. Currently, no reasonable person would seriously declare that the Canadiens are the best team in the National Hockey League. Certainly, no one would state it as a fact. You could say it as a profession of personal conviction.

The religion of the Canadiens requires having confidence in the Canadiens no matter what happens, hoping, year after year, that the cup will come back to Montreal. During the famine years, the Canadiens force their loyal fans to believe, against all odds, despite the weaknesses of the team, injuries, the lack of Francophone players, problems hiring top players, despite all the problems experienced by the players – on the ice and in the city – the managers and the owners; not to mention pressure from the media. The fans have no choice but to be loyal and believe!

Reacting to the idea that the Canadiens are a religion, a mischievous blogger wrote about the Toronto Maple Leafs, 'Cheering for the Leafs is like going to church when you know there's no god.'⁴ He was wrong, of course. Because a true believer supports his team whatever happens, precisely because he believes that there is a god, and he believes that he can help his team.

2. Making the Canadiens Into a Religion

Until now, a religion of the Habs has remained theoretical, impersonal. But in Montreal, it is not hard to find a few examples of people who really mix the hockey club and religion. In my research, I have

⁴ Entry by 'sd2smith,' 3 December 2008 in the comments section of the article 'Worshipping les Canadiens,' *CBCsports.ca*.

identified two ways of doing this, which I will qualify using the first names of people who, spontaneously, have wanted to share them with me. There will therefore be Victoria's way and Théodore's way. They are quite different.

Victoria uses her Catholic faith to make sure that the Habs win. Therefore, her way belongs to an inclusive model, in which sports is included in religion. Théodore, on the other hand, has made the Canadiens his own religion. Théodore's way belongs to a syncretic model, in which sport and religion are blended (Bauer, 2009).

2.1. Victoria's Way

In 2009, after taking part in a broadcast on Radio Ville-Marie, a Catholic station in Montreal, I received an e-mail from a listener. Here is what she wrote:

My daughter Victoria... had given school presentation on Brother André... She distributed medals and statuettes of Brother André to each of her classmates (surprisingly everyone was very happy with the gifts). The same evening, the whole family was at the Bell Centre, invited to a box seat to watch the match between the Canadiens and the Rangers on 19 February 2008... The Habs were crushed, I remember, maybe 5-0. I suggested that my daughter (then 11 years old) asks Brother André for help. He owed her given the 'apostolic publicity' she had given him that very day in her class! No sooner said than done, and with each prayer, bam... a goal for the Canadians. And it went on and on. The other guests couldn't believe their eyes.

I had to confess to them that Victoria was imploring Brother André for help (she's the kind of person who quickly gets favours from Heaven, but she doesn't overdo it, unfortunately!) In the end, the whole gang in the box seat congratulated Brother André. I really had the impression that the Blessed was playing with the team. The Rangers admitted in the press that they didn't understand: 'The puck flew on its own straight into the net.' We really saw it as a supernatural intervention, which I can say without being sanctimonious. In the elevator, Victoria, saw the happy people and she told me, 'You know, it's thanks to me that they're happy and they don't know it... Well, also thanks to Brother André.' The next day, the media reported on the match of the century, incomparable and never equalled... That only increased Victoria's feelings of pride and, at the same time, her confidence in Brother André. Except that she has kept that secret the fact that she got Brother André to play with the Canadiens on that remarkable February 19, 2008, ... (translation).

Victoria is not an isolated case in Montreal. She is not alone in thinking that the saints of the Catholic tradition can help the Canadiens. In fact, the devotion of the fans of the Canadiens is closely associated with them, to two of them in particular, Saint Joseph and Saint Brother André, and to the oratory, founded by the latter and dedicated to the former. Pilgrims go there to gain favours from the two saints, favours that they obtain, for example, by climbing on their knees the stairs leading to it, by lighting candles in front of portraits of Saint Joseph or by touching Brother André's casket.

When the fans of the Canadiens have doubts, when they no longer believe that the Canadiens can win on their own, they do not hesitate to climb up to the mountain to plead for help from Saint Joseph and Brother André.

On April 14, 2010, one day before the Habs began the first round of playoffs against the Washington Capitals, the CKAC-Sports radio station organized a pilgrimage to the oratory. Informed by a student, I decided to attend. There were approximately 20 young adults, wearing Canadian jerseys – there were two 'Maurice Richards' and two 'Jean Béliveau,' of course, a 'Carey Price,' already classic, and a 'Scott Gomez,' which was more unexpected. Gathering on the terrace, they conducted a brief parody of a mass dedicated to the Canadiens, with the radio host acting as officiant, then they went down into the crypt to light candles to ask for help from Saint Joseph.

Of course, they were doing it primarily for the media. But once the journalists were gone, several participants discreetly lit their own candles. 'I did it to ask that no one get injured during the series,' one of them confided in me.

2.2. Théodore's Way

Théodore's way is quite different. Instead of using his Christian faith, or any other traditional, to help the Canadiens, Théodore – seriously or not, it is impossible to know – made the Habs the object of his religion.

Théodore is a university student. He had a Facebook page entitled 'Temple du Hockey (des Canadiens).' It shows 27 pictures of the temple of the Canadiens that he built in his own apartment. The temple consists of a room full of relics and liturgical objects, all to the glory of the Habs. There are Canadian jerseys, Canadian flags, the Canadian pucks, Canadian sticks, figurines of Canadian players, etc. There is even a seat from the old Forum, which Théodore only sits in during Habs playoff games.

In the centre of the room, Théodore has built an altar, with four steps, a step for each round in the playoffs, built using twenty pucks with the Canadian logo. In front, he has placed figurines of Canadian players, which he has flanked with two candles, one red and the other white. On the highest step, Théodore has placed a small replica of the Stanley Cup.

Does Théodore really have faith in the Canadiens? Only he can answer that. But neither on his Facebook page, nor in any of the conversations that I have had with him, has Théodore ever given any indication that all this might just be a huge joke.

In any case, the photographs clearly show a kind of piety directed at the Canadiens. When it comes to the Canadiens, Théodore does not have faith in a god, he does believe in some superior being he thinks would be capable of helping the Canadiens and is willing to do so. In Théodore's religion, the Canadiens occupy the place of God, of the divine, of the absolute, of the sacred, of the Force, I do not know what name Théodore would give to it.

But it should be pointed out that Théodore organizes his Canadien religion from a very Catholic perspective, which, once again, is hardly surprising in Quebec. His temple reproduces precisely the model of a Catholic church, with its center aisle, its side chapel, its relics, its altar and its liturgical vases. The differences are minimal, but significant. The Stanley Cup has replaced the chalice or the monstrance. And on the wall, where we would find a crucifix, there is a Habs jersey.

3. The Dogmas of the Canadiens Religion

I think I have erased any doubts about the existence of a Canadien religion. It is not just a theologian trying to impose a religious dimension on a cultural phenomenon: it is clearly shown in the two cases of Victoria and Théodore. However different they are. Like all religions, it has dogmas according to which the faithful are supposed to lead their lives. Some are specific to it, others come from elsewhere. I would like to highlight three of them.

3.1. One dogma of hockey: 'You will be a man!'

As explained by Canadian theologian Tom Sinclair-Faulkner, hockey promotes three main values: 'In the hockey cosmos one is Canadian, one is manly (a quality which goes beyond sheer masculinity), and that one is excellent (by which I mean something that has more to do with winning than with the ancient Greek notion of *arete*).'⁵ I will now examine the first value, but expressed in a different way: 'In the world of the Canadiens, one is a Quebecer,' and I will set aside the third, which seems to me too broad to be specific to the Canadiens or even to hockey. But the second one, virility or masculinity, seems to me to be very important for all hockey teams, including for the Canadiens. I therefore make it the first dogma of the Canadien religion.

It is always strange – and a little disturbing – when a man feels he needs to prove that he is a man. Being

⁵ Sinclair-Faulkner, 2005, p. 391.

a man should not require proof. Being a man should be simply a matter of fact. What could give rise to the need to prove it, if not the fear of not being one or not being seen as one? But, after all, perhaps such a fear is not illegitimate in a sport in which the players are always wearing a cup and garters! In hockey, you have to be manly, and this manliness corresponds to very precise stereotypes. I will give two examples: the ‘playoff beard’ and the goalie’s face.

The playoff beard is a good way to show on your face how successful your team is. It first appeared with the New York Islanders in the early eighties, and the logic is simple: the longer is the beard, the longer the team has played in the playoffs and therefore the better it is. The playoff beard is also a good way to show your virility, because it makes it possible to distinguish the men from the boys, which is the role attributed to it in the playoffs. The playoff beard therefore fulfills the function of an institutional ritual, as defined by Pierre Bourdieu, an attempt to transform cultural differences into natural differences, to have acknowledged that the adult is the one who has the beard, which is only one way to define adulthood. But there is still more behind the playoff beard. Bourdieu showed that the first function of institutional rituals, such as circumcision, was the least obvious, the most secret. ‘The act of institution is an act of social magic that can create difference *ex nihilo*, or else (as is more often the case) by exploiting as it was pre-existing differences, like the biological differences between the sexes’ (Bourdieu, 1991, pp. 119-120; translation).

From this perspective, the true meaning of the playoff beard becomes obvious. Its role is not to indicate which players took part in the playoffs, nor is it distinguishing adult players from child players. The playoff beard exists primarily to establish a difference between those who can, who could and who will be able to grow a beard, that is, all men, whatever their talent as hockey players, and those who cannot, and could not, and will not be able to, that is, all women, whatever their talent as hockey players. It therefore becomes obvious that the true function of the playoff beard to make hockey manly by excluding women.

There is another domain, much less symbolic, in which hockey constructs its concept of virility, defined by physical courage. Hockey demands that players be ready to offer their own bodies for the good of the team. And in the history of hockey, the greatest sacrifices were made by the goalies. They gave so much of themselves to meet this expectation, to fulfil what was considered their duty, especially during the long period when they played barefaced. In an absolutely fascinating book, Jim Hynes and Gary Smith recall the long history of the suffering of goaltenders, between 1 January 1918, when the National Hockey League gave goalkeepers permission to dive to the ice, and 7 April 1974, when Andy Brown was the last goalie who ‘defended his team’s net barefaced’ (Hynes and Smith, 2008, p. 94), plus the day when Jacques Plante set a scandalous precedent, by being the first goalie in the National Hockey League

to wear a protective mask. It was 1 November 1959 in Madison Square Garden in New York City. What seems so self-evident today took a long time to be accepted. In order to win the right to protect his face, the Canadien goalie faced many problems and met a great deal of resistance. ‘I had to show good results to keep the mask,’ Plante would say later. But even though he did, Plante still had to put up with teammates, reporters and fans who suggested he was a coward’ (Hynes and Smith, 2008, p. 50). Of course, the confusion between masculinity and stupidity, between experience and scars, between courage and recklessness does not concern only goaltenders. It is not until 1979 that the NHL made helmets mandatory and, only in 2013 that the NHL made visors standard for all new players in the league. Fortunately, the players themselves are redefining masculinity in hockey. A survey conducted in 2007 by *The Globe and Mail* showed that nearly half the players in the National Hockey League wore a visor or face shield. Times have changed since 2004, when commentator Don Cherry could say – in an accurate statement, but obviously not very politically correct – that ‘only French-Canadian players and Europeans wear visors.’

The world of hockey took a long time to admit that masculinity was not measured in the number of scars a player has on his face. It should be noted that the French Canadian and the Europeans players were a little quicker to understand it, since they were the first to reinterpret the dogma of virility.

3.2. A dogma in Quebec: ‘You’ll speak French!’

We were 10, 11 or 12 years old. It was a little like [the film] *The Dog Who Stopped the War*. It was in a working-class neighbourhood of Montreal. Kids faced off, three against three, street against street, anglos against francos. They dressed in the blue of the *Leafs*, the enemy, us in the red of the Canadiens. Blue, white, red: the most beautiful Jersey in the history of the sport (Trudel, 2001, p. 12; translation).

If the Canadiens were a religion in Quebec, they should resemble in the memories of Pierre Trudel, the world of *The Hockey Sweater* by Roch Carrier, a world in which the children spent their winter between three places, ‘the school, the church and the skating rink,’ in which, if you recited a prayer, it was to ‘ask God to help us play as well as Maurice Richard,’ in which the young priest was the referee, in which the player who misbehaved had to ‘go to the church and ask God to forgive [him],’ in which a little Quebecer could not wear the sweater of the Toronto Maple Leafs, because they were Anglophones and, no doubt, because they were Protestants, in which the victim could ask God ‘to send me right away, a hundred million moths to eat up my Toronto Maple Leafs sweater’ (Carrier, 1984).

In Quebec’s collective memory or collective unconsciousness, the Canadiens player must be a Quebecer and therefore, speak French and be Catholic. But the facts contradict this representation, transforming

it into a dogma to be believed rather than an observation to be made. I will present three arguments that invalidate the dogma of a Francophone essence of the Canadiens.

- First of all, in 1909, the Club Athlétique Canadien (the first name of the Canadiens) was founded by two Anglophone businessmen, Jimmy Gardner, one of the owners of the Wanderers, a well-established Anglophone hockey club in Montreal, and John Ambrose O'Brien, the owner of the Renfrew Millionaires, an Ontario hockey team. They created this new team to increase the number of games played in Montreal, to create more rivalry and more interest in hockey, and to reach a new clientele among the Francophones of Montreal. Their goal was moreover so obvious that a journalist with *Le Devoir*, Tancrede Marsil, accused O'Brien of trying to 'harvest in the East [of Montreal] some good dough' (Bonneau and Hafsi, 1996, p. 35; translation). In that time, despite its nickname, the Canadiens were not the team *of* the 'Canadiens,' a term that then designated the Francophones of Canada.
- The Canadiens were never an entirely Francophone team. For its first official game (it won 7 to 3 against the Cobalt Silver Kings, of Cobalt, Ontario on 5 January 1910) it already had an Anglophone player, Newsy Lalonde, who came from Cornwall, Ontario (Guay, 1990, p. 259). The team never made hiring Francophones a priority. It has always tried to recruit the best players, whatever their language. Howie Morenz, for example, the first great star of the Canadiens, was born in Mitchell, Ontario. His parents were immigrants from Switzerland. He was Protestant, and it was the 'Very Reverend Malcolm Campbell, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Canada' (Goyens, Turowetz and Dugay, 1996, p. 38) who presided over his funeral in the Forum, on March 10, 1937, in front of 50,000 people.
- Finally, the colour of the Canadiens' sweater reveals the full ambiguity of its identity. In sports, the colour worn is rarely inconsequential. In English soccer, for example, when a city has two high-level teams and distinction is made on a confessional basis, red is the colour of the Catholic team, such as Manchester United or Liverpool, and blue the colour of the Protestant team, Manchester City or Everton. We could apply that model in Canada and say that the Canadiens wear a red jersey because they come from a Catholic province and that the Leafs wear a blue jersey, because they come from a Protestant city. But in Canada, the symbolism of colours follows different rules. Blue is the colour of Quebec, and red, the colour of Canada. Should we therefore conclude that the colour of the jerseys of the Canadiens makes it more a Canadian team than Quebec team? I believe that we can, especially if we compare it to the Nordiques of Quebec City which, during their brief existence, wore a jersey reproducing very obviously the Quebec flag, blue with white fleurs-de-lis. And that is perhaps because the red makes the team too Canadian

that no one has ever nicknamed the Canadiens ‘the red’ – as the athletes of McGill University are called *Red Men* – but rather ‘le Tricolore,’ a nickname that makes sense, since the colours of the Canadiens are red, white and blue, but a nickname that is above all more acceptable, since it refers to other tricolours, Francophone cousins on the other side of the Atlantic.

But if the Canadiens have been, over 100 years, a team with a complex identity in which have been mixed freely and effectively owners, coaches, players and fans of all origins, all languages and all religions (the Canadiens are more in the image of the city of Montreal than that of the province of Quebec) why are Francophone Quebecers so sure that the team belongs to them? Where does this idea come from? Where do they get this conviction that they declare with such passionate and in rather bombastic terms as these below?

The Habs are not just a story of hockey. It is, first of all, a story of courage, sacrifice, darkness and the victory of a French-Canadian people that sometimes resembles a Gaulish village. The history of the Canadiens is a source of inspiration for the French Canadians who draw on the recognition of the value, the talent and the determination of a Francophone team that built itself and wrote itself into the heart of the struggle that was tearing apart French Canadians and English Canadians (Garand, 2009, p. 6; translation).

Quebec owes this Francophone appropriation of the Canadiens to one man: Maurice Richard, obviously. He was the one who proved to Quebecers that they could beat any English Canadian, any American! ‘One thing remains certain: since Maurice Richard in particular, the Montreal Canadiens are in a way the national club of Quebecers’ (Bérubé, 1973, p. 200; translation). The Canadiens owe this status to an event in the life of the great player, ‘the Maurice Richard riot’ on 17 March 1955. ‘When Maurice Richard was suspended, every single French Canadian felt punished and angry’ (Aquin and Yanacopoulo, 1972, p. 122; translation).

Outraged by the suspension of Maurice Richard for the duration of the playoffs (he had punched a linesman as a fight was broken up) the fans of the Canadiens, united whatever language they spoke, booed, insulted and then physically attacked the man responsible for the suspension, Clarence Campbell, the commissioner of the National Hockey League who had come to watch a game at the Forum. The fans of the Canadiens forced that cancelation of the game, left the Forum and went on a rampage, first around the Forum, then on the St. Catherine Street in downtown Montreal.

Little by little, Quebecers came to consider this event as the moment when they dared to revolt. They saw it as the beginning of the Quiet Revolution, a wake-up call for Quebec consciousness.

Some cultural observers have called *l'affair Richard* [sic] the flashpoint for Quebec's 'Quiet Revolution,' manifested in the 'masters in our own house' policies of Quebec governments in the 1960s as a response to 200 years of English Canadian and American domination (McKinley, 2000, p. 189).

It was very much thanks to Maurice Richard and to the riot that the Canadiens came to embody pride in being Québécois. In return, Quebec imposed this dogma on them: 'You will speak French!' and expects them to favour Quebec players.

3.3. A dogma of the Canadiens: 'Through suffering, you will win!'

In the dressing room of the Canadiens, we find the famous lines of the poem *In Flanders Fields* in its original version – 'To you, from failing hands, we throw/The torch; be yours to hold it High' – and in the Canadiens' own French translation – 'Nos bras meurtris vous tendent le flambeau,/À vous toujours de le porter bien haut.' Chosen during the 1952-1953 season by Dick Irvin (or maybe by Frank Selke), these two lines have become the motto of the Canadiens. They were scrupulously recopied to the new dressing room of the club, in what was the Molson Centre and is now the Bell Centre.

I am not able to evaluate the real effect of such a motto on the players of the Canadiens. But I can highlight the specific characteristics of the French translation of the lines. Because it is neither a word-for-word translation of the text by John McCrae, nor its official translation – 'À vous jeunes désabusés, À vous de porter l'oriflamme.'⁶ Between the English and French versions, there are slight differences; a lot of meaning can be found in these details.

The 'failing hands' became 'bras meurtris' ('bruised arms'), a triple change: an extension of the hands to the arms, the change from a verb meaning failure to a verb suggesting suffering (bruise) and the shift from the active voice (failing) to the passive voice (bruised).

It is a small step from passive to Passion, a step that I can easily cross in the Quebec context. The change from 'failing hands' to 'nos bras meurtris' (the possessive removes any doubt about who possesses those arm) takes all its meaning in the context of a Catholic Quebec. The bruised arms evoke other wounds, those of the crucified Christ, an image that is central in all Catholic churches. And they refer to a very common expression in Quebec, 'nous sommes nés pour un petit pain,' 'we are born for a small crust of bread,' by which Quebecers express the small share that the Anglophones left them for a long time, and consequently, the little ambition that they set for themselves. The motto of the Canadiens corresponds precisely to this doloristic mentality in Quebec.

⁶ Veterans Affairs Canada, <http://www.veterans.gc.ca/>.

But at the same time, it transcends it. Because the Canadiens allowed Quebec to hope for much more than a small crust of bread, a big loaf, a brioche, the whole bakery! With their twenty-four Stanley Cups, the Canadiens are the hockey club that has most often won the trophy and the second most victorious sports organization in North American. It is second only to the New York Yankees. By declaring in the French version that ‘the torch’ – here certainly the capacity to win, pride and the responsibility to be part of the Canadiens – is held by bruised arms, the Canadiens recall that Quebec can win, even though it is through inevitable suffering.

4. Not My Religion

After presenting as honestly as possible the facts that permit me to talk about the Canadiens as a religion, I can firmly state that the religion of the Canadiens is not my religion, that the god of the religion of the Canadiens is not my god. I will give three reasons for this.

- First of all, the religion of the Canadiens is too fragile. We sometimes tend to forget that the Canadiens have existed only since the last century. That is certainly a long time for a hockey team. This certainly respectable for any sports team in North America. But, for a religion, it is a short time! The future of the Canadiens is not guaranteed, therefore, and nor is that of the religion of the Canadiens. Of course, its special status (it is the oldest team, among the original six teams of the National Hockey League, the only Francophone team, etc.) protects it. But when money is involved, anything is possible, and feelings come second. Even the Canadiens could be sold and moved to another city. As strange as it may seem in the Quebec of today, where the religion of the Canadiens seems much more fashionable than Christianity, I am ready to wager that Christianity will last longer than the Canadiens.
- Second, the religion of the Canadiens is too tribal. It succumbs easily to the danger of monopolizing a god as only the god of the Habs. It implies almost inevitably the denigration of adversaries, the teams against which the Canadiens play. It requires hating the cities that those teams represent and, too often, insulting their fans and sometimes, fortunately rarely, attacking them physically. The God I believe in promotes love, not hate.
- And finally, third, the religion of the Canadiens is too selective a religion. Beyond its unifying image, the Canadiens are a veritable machine to produce selection, to produce exclusion, on the ice and in the stands. On the ice, it selects according to talent. It forms the summit of a hockey pyramid, which only keeps the exceptional players and pitilessly eliminates those who are mediocre or only good. And with respect to the stands, it selects there too, but according to money, reserving the best seats for the wealthiest, or to those who are prepared to spend the

most. My religion operates on a radically different principle. It is a religion of choosing, in which God does not reward people according to their merits, but in which he freely welcomes, some will say certain persons or certain peoples, I would say all persons and all the peoples, without consideration for their wealth, nor their talent, nor their behaviour, nor even their faith. This no doubt unfair, but it's the only way to compensate for natural or cultural inequalities. It is obvious that the Canadiens would not survive for long if they applied that principle. And that is why they can't be my religion, why they cannot give meaning to my life.

The National Hockey League can, however, seem less selective, favouring the less strong teams, through the draft system, or the less rich, by establishing a salary cap. But there is nothing generous in this. These equalization measures have only one objective, that of making the season more interesting, increasing media coverage and therefore of making more money. In my opinion, a religion in which the key goal is winning games and making money is a bad religion.

5. The Line Between Faith and Idolatry

As theologian Daniel Lys used to say, there are two ways to an idolater. Of course, there is the idolatry of someone who worships a false god, but there is also the idolatry of someone who worships the true god in a false manner. Without any doubt, we find both forms of idolatry in the religion of the Canadiens. To put it succinctly, Théodore worships a false god and Victoria worships the true God, but falsely. But the fact that the religion of the Canadiens is idolatry does still not condemn it. Put in its proper place, provided that you do nothing more of it than what it is, the Canadiens can sustain the faith of believers.

5.1. May God be with the Canadiens!

Théodore has made the Canadiens the object of his religion. His worship is for the team. He puts his trust in it. And that is why Théodore's way belongs to the first form of idolatry: worship of a false god. And I can prove it! But to do this, I have to introduce a little of my Protestant theology.

For me, it is more than a conviction, it is a certainty: God is not revealed only on Sunday in church, he can also – he never *has to*, not even in church – be revealed on Friday in the mosque, Saturday in the synagogue, every day, everywhere, and obviously on Tuesday nights at the Bell Centre. From the same perspective, I believe that God does not reveal himself only through priests, pastors, rabbis or imams, but that he can also reveal himself through anyone, including a hockey player. And I believe that God reveals himself not only in theological concepts, or religious expressions or music, liturgies, sacraments or sacred objects, but he can also be revealed – if he wishes – in all words, all songs, all rituals, including

those of a game of the Canadiens, and in all objects, including a hockey stick.⁷

For example, ‘the Church’ (any Church) is only one means that God can use to enter into a relationship with human beings. This relationship can also occur directly with an individual, or through a cultural artefact, other than a Church, since a Church is obviously also a cultural artefact, like a song, a person, a film, a gesture, etc.

Moreover, this concept is based on a theology with a double inspiration. God, through his spirit, inspires the person who produces an artefact so that it becomes a word of God, an image of God, a taste of God, etc. But God also inspires the person who perceives the artefact, so that it becomes, for that person, a word of God, an image of God, a taste of God, etc.

Like all cultural artefacts, a beautiful goal by Max Pacioretty, a magnificent stop by Carey Price or a solid check by P. K. Subban are capable of carrying the revelation of God, as long as the person who looks at them is capable of perceiving them as a foretaste of the beauty, perfection and pleasure who will become complete and common in the kingdom of God, when we are all capable of scoring like Pacioretty, to stop pucks like Price and defend like Subban. A beautiful goal by Pacioretty can transmit the revelation of God for the one to whom He gives an understanding as a sign of this harmony that he wants for all of us. A beautiful goal by Pacioretty works as a sign of the penetration of the Kingdom of God into daily life, like a miracle that shows the power of God and his love for the world.

For me, it is therefore obvious that a beautiful goal by Pacioretty can function as a religious artefact, suitable for revealing God to someone who has eyes to see and who knows how to use them. But on one condition, which is to consider Pacioretty not as a god, but as a message from God, a kind of angel, according to the traditional term. For the Canadiens to be capable of revealing God, it is necessary for the team to give up on being a religion, for it to accept being what it is, a hockey club.

This distinction is essential because there is always a risk of giving Pacioretty (or any other player) all the credit for the beautiful goal and consider him as a superior being endowed with supernatural powers, precisely what a theologian would call an idol. Félix Leclerc, for example, yielded to this temptation when he wrote on October 19, 1983, about Maurice Richard: ‘When he shoots, America screams. When he scores, the deaf hear. When he is penalized, the telephone lines heat up. When he passes, the rookies dream. It’s the wind skating. It’s all of Quebec on its feet. Who scares who lives... It’s snowing!’ (Quoted in Pellerin, 1988, p. 11; translation).

Of course, this is how the Canadiens can become a religion, a religion that I, as the Protestant theologian, would consider idolatry. But idolatry is not an inevitability. The beautiful goal by Pacioretty can also

⁷ For more information on this concept, see Bauer, 2007.

serve to strengthen faith. 'It is customary in Protestant theology to analyze the performance of a man, his *Leistung*, as Martin Luther said, from the perspective of justification through faith. Any performance, from this perspective, can be transformed either into self-justification and idolatry, or into human achievement aware of its limitations and its relationship with God' (Müller, 2008, p. 45; translation). When a believer includes the Canadiens within the framework of justification through faith, when he or she relates Pacioretty's beautiful goal to God, neither the player himself, nor a god who pushed the puck in the goal, but to a god who makes Pacioretty capable of scoring extraordinary goals, when the believer understands that perfection as a foretaste of what awaits us, awaits us all, in the kingdom of God, then the Canadiens begin to transmit the revelation of God.

That makes all the difference. And it is because he does not do this that Théodore is wrong and that his way is idolatry. Since the Canadiens represents an opportunity to meet God, if, and only if, the team is not considered to be a god and, of course, if it does not take itself to be God. It is when the fans consider the Canadiens as a cultural artefact, when they consider the players as highly talented human beings, that the Canadiens can fulfill for them a religious function and bring them into a relationship to God. And it is perhaps after a defeat that we can most easily verify if the Canadiens are a religion or a cultural artefact. The fans love winners, and they love winning teams. The fans of the Canadiens are sure that God is with the team when they win. They even consider their victories to be a demonstration that God loves the Canadiens. But how do they deal with defeat? They often perceive it as a sign that God has abandoned them. In my opinion, they are wrong. They should learn that God is also, and maybe especially, with the Habs in difficult times, the evenings of defeat and elimination. If they doubt this, they should remember that Christianity is based on a loser, on a defeat. The man who dies alone and miserable on a cross is the one who shows the true face of God.

So, yes, a beautiful goal by Pacioretty is a foretaste of the kingdom of God, because ordinary things can carry the revelation of God, can be parables or metaphors to describe the ultimate reality. In fact, even a lucky goal, a chance goal, a 'garbage goal' is a foretaste of the kingdom of God, but the advantage of a beautiful goal is that the goalie is not to blame. And who knows, if Jesus had been a Quebecer, perhaps he would have imagined a parable like this: 'The Kingdom of God is like a beautiful Pacioretty goal. The fan who recorded it invites his friends to see it and watch it over and over again...'

5.2. May God bless the Habs!

Victoria's way is exemplary of the second form of idolatry, false worship of the true God. Victoria does not make the same mistake as Théodore. She does not worship the Canadiens, but she asks God to help. Nevertheless, Victoria's way is idolatry. Here again, I can demonstrate it by presenting another

aspect of my Protestant theology.

I have no difficulty, even as a Protestant, Western academic theologian, stating that God takes an interest in the Canadiens and that he can intervene in the lives of the Canadiens or in the games of the Canadiens. God can help the owner and the general manager to run the organization. He can help the coach train his team. He can help the players play. He can help the medical team provide care and help the support staff with getting the equipment ready and cleaning the ice. He can help the fans cheer the team on. Some believers or some non-believers might consider it futile to think that God could take an interest in the Canadiens. I admit that there are more important things in the world, but that does not mean that God could not or should not take an interest in the Canadiens, and there are at least three reasons for this.

- First of all, even though a victory or a defeat of the Canadiens does not change the face of the world, it can have a big impact, at least in Montreal and in Quebec. To be convinced of this, it is enough to consider the issues related to the Canadiens: the money they generate, the jobs they create, the injuries they cause, the more or less crazy dreams that they generate, the hopes and despair that they inspire. For all these reasons, for both the positive and the negative, the Habs need God's help.
- Second, God's interest in the Canadiens does not occur at the expense of other situations or other people that might have a more urgent or more crucial need for God's help. The God I believe in is versatile, multitasking or, in more traditional terms, omnipotent. He is capable of intervening at the same time and with the same effectiveness inside the Bell Centre and in any church, in any hospital and in any gesture of love. Need I add that God has exactly the same interest in the Canadiens that he has in all the other teams of the National Hockey League? Whatever the fans of the Canadiens might think, God also blesses the Leafs, the Bruins, the Penguins and even the Flyers; God also intervenes in Madison Square Garden and Bell Centre, he also intervenes in favour of the adversaries of the Canadiens.
- Finally, I refuse to decide myself what God should take an interest in, what he should take care of. I am incapable of putting limitations on the actions of God. What is enough for God to be concerned about? What would be too trivial for him to take an interest in it? I think it is wiser to let God decide, even though, for my part, I would submit that everything is important to his eyes, and that nothing is too trivial for him.

I therefore have no reason to think that there is any place in the world for a human activity that escapes the interest of God, not even a hockey game. But I would like to be even more specific about the form taken by the help that God can give to the Canadiens.

Let us imagine, first of all, that he intervenes directly. In a fatalistic concept, everything that happens to the Canadiens, good or bad, would depend on the will of God. Believing in such direct intervention by God in all aspects of the lives of the Canadiens would force me to thank him whenever a player is injured, or a Canadiens player injures a rival player. I should consider these occurrences (objectively, they are bad things) as the will of God to punish bad behaviour (for example, a player who has played badly or who has missed a match) or rebalance a game when a team is too strong or make room for a substitute player or a young player. I know that God sometimes works in mysterious ways, but to act in such a way would, in my eyes, seem very strange.

Again, from the perspective of his direct intervention, I cannot believe either that God could deflect a shot to go straight into an empty net. When such an incident occurs, my reason and my faith would cause me instead to eliminate all supernatural causes, such as divine or diabolical intervention, and prefer a natural explanation such as a small bump on the ice. I would attribute a less obvious unforeseen occurrence, a shot hitting the post, for example, to clumsiness or bad luck.

But I do not, however, conclude that God does not play a role in the lives of the Canadiens. I believe rather in the possibility of indirect intervention by God, on the ice and outside the rink. I believe that God intervenes indirectly, through those who do his will. Georges Bernanos wrote: ‘God has no other hands but ours.’ In applying that phrase to hockey, I would say that God has no other hands but those of the players to handle the puck or to stop it. He has no other brain but the brain of the coach to come up with plays. He has no other voices but those of the fans to cheer on a team.

I believe that God helps the players who recognize that they need his help. And I was strengthened in my conviction when I heard the testimony of Daniel Bouchard, a former goalie with Quebec City Nordiques, who converted to Christianity and whose nickname was ‘the hand of God.’ In 1982, he declared on the evening of a victory, coming off the ice still dripping with sweat: ‘I praise God because he made stops for me. I felt I was just a tool for him. I’d prayed enough. Sometimes it doesn’t work!’ (Desrosiers and Thibault, 2009). The fact that he said ‘God made stops for me’ could lead you to think that Bouchard believed that God had intervened directly in front of the net. But the goalie added a clarification, which made all the difference: ‘I felt I was just a tool for him.’ Everything becomes clear. It was not God who blocked the puck, but Daniel Bouchard, in fact. Since God has no hands, he needed the hand of a man to stop the shots. That evening, the hand of God was Bouchard’s left hand. That evening, God used Bouchard’s hand as a tool.

God can help any hockey team, even the Canadiens. But he does not handle the puck himself. He acts indirectly, by inspiring the owners and general managers, the players and the fans. It is therefore not God who makes the puck skip or deflect. He is not the one who makes it roll for one or the other of

the teams. It is not God who acts, but he can inspire the player who is handling the puck, the person who made the stick or the puck, the person who cleaned the ice surface, all things that influence the trajectory of the puck.

I can now come back to Victoria's way and explain why that way is idolatry. It is clearly a case, I repeat, of the second form of idolatry, since Victoria practises false worship of the true God. It seems to me, however, that asking for help from Brother André could be seen as the first form of idolatry. Because if Victoria adores Brother André or if it is him that she is counting on, she is definitely worshipping a false god. But perhaps she is avoiding that form of idolatry. Perhaps Victoria knows that, without God, Brother André by himself can do nothing, that all his power comes from God. Perhaps she understands that asking for help from Brother André means asking for God's help. I hope so, even though the e-mail of her mother never mentions God but only Brother André, eight times. As a Protestant theologian, I cannot help thinking that she would have been better to ask God directly for help. That would be the best way to avoid any risk of the first form of idolatry, even though that it would not automatically avert the dangers of the second.

But Victoria's way obviously belongs to that second form of idolatry. Victoria is wrong, because she believes that direct intervention is compulsory or automatic as long as you have the necessary faith ('but she's the kind who quickly gets favours from Heaven') to accomplish good deeds (Victoria had 'distributed medals and statuettes of Brother André to each of her classmates) or to say the right prayers (the Mum suggests that her daughter 'ask for help from Brother André'). Even though Victoria worships the true god (and I am still doubtful) her way is still idolatry because she worships him in a false way. God's intervention can never be automatic or compulsory. It is always the result of a freely taken decision. No act of piety, as profound as it may be, can change the course of a game or a season. Victoria would be better to pray for the players to agree to become the instruments of God.

6. A Fish in the Logo

I will conclude this chapter with a short meditation, which resembles a children's game: 'Who will help Olivier find the blue fish in the logo of the Canadiens?' Take a few seconds to look at the logo and try to find the fish. It is there, I can assure you. It is swimming somewhere inside the design. To make it visible, you just have to ignore the big letter C, delete the two small blue squares and complete the inner blue line. Do you see it now? Once you have spotted, it is obvious.

Everyone knows what the fish symbol means. It is often seen on the back of cars. Without any doubt, it is a Christian symbol. In fact, it was one of the very first, a symbol used long before the symbol of the cross, a symbol that was found in the catacombs. The fish was and remains a Christian symbol because

its name in Greek, *ichthys*, is the acronym of a confession of faith. Spelled *I-C-H-T-U-S*, it evoked the initials of five Greek words Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour.

In the first centuries of our era, the fish (the word and the image) was used by Christians as a code, a secret code because Christians were persecuted. They needed to be able to recognize each other without their enemies identifying them. The symbol of the fish gradually fell out of use, supplanted by the cross, especially when Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire and Christians no longer needed to hide. The symbol almost disappeared entirely, until it was revived by the Christian Evangelicals at the beginning of the 20th century. They made it the sign of their faith.

But what can we say about the fish in the logo of the Canadiens? Could it represent a subliminal confession of faith? Would it be discreet evidence of the Christianity of the club? Of course not! But writing that is not enough. We have to remember the theology of double inspiration. It matters little if the fish in the logo is accidental, it matters little that it has no deliberate Christian meaning. I see that fish in the logo. And for me, it takes on a theological value, a Christian value. For me, it has the status of a confession of Christian faith. And for you too now, I hope. Now, you will no longer be able to look at that logo in the same way. Every time you see it, you will also see the blue fish and you would remember that Jesus is Christ, the son of God, the Saviour. Which seems to me to be a good way of putting a little faith, not religion, into the Canadiens. Permit me to call it immodestly call Olivier's way...

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