

PRAY, PLAY, WIN... OR LOSE! FIELD RESEARCH INSIDE THE MONTREAL *ALOUETTES* CHRISTIAN PRAXIS.¹

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As I was working on finding the religious aspects of the *Montréal Canadiens* (the Montréal National Hockey League team) and more generally on hockey as a religion (Bauer, 2009, 2011a, 2011b, 2011h; Bauer & Barreau, 2009), I was told by Michel Desjardins from Radio-Canada that the Montréal *Alouettes*, the Montréal Canadian Football League (CFL) team², have their own chaplain. Knowing that having a chaplain inside the *Montréal Canadiens* was unthinkable and something rather seldom inside the National Hockey League³, I decided to work on this new aspect of the relation between sport and religion – the place given to Christian faith by another Montréal professional sports team.

1 Starting Point

While looking for some general information about prayers in the CFL, I read this post on a blog:

‘Before the beginning of the Grey Cup final, the head coach, Marc Trestman, led all the players of the Montréal Alouettes in a group prayer. In other words, he asked, in the words of Ambrose Bierce, that “the laws of the universe be annulled on behalf of a single [or in this case multiple] petitioner, confessedly unworthy”. Furthermore, Trestman was requesting that the “laws of the universe be annulled” so as to favour the Alouettes, at the expense of the players of the other team (the Saskatchewan Roughriders).

Throughout the game, it appeared that something had gone terribly wrong with this strategy; it looked as if the Alouettes were going to be soundly beaten. Had they prayed to the wrong God (a distinct possibility considering the amount of competition)? Perhaps they had not prayed “properly”, or maybe it was the Roughriders that God really liked, despite the fact that they had not prayed before the game (their ascent to the Grey Cup final, after all, had a slight resemblance the trials and tribulations encountered by the character of Jesus

¹ A draft of this paper was presented at the University of Cambridge (UK): Bauer, Olivier. 2012. *Pray, Play, Win ... and Lose! Does God Prefer the Montreal Alouettes?* Presented at the 3rd International Conference on Sport and Society, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK. I am very grateful to Tom Paul, and the *Alouettes* for having accepted me inside their Christian Praxis. I want to thank Hélène Bauer who has very carefully edited this paper. I owe her everything, which is right. And I keep accountable for everything, which could remain wrong.

² The Montréal *Alouettes* is a professional football organization founded in 1946 that has won seven Grey Cups (the championship game of the CFL) in 1949, 1970, 1974, 1977, 2002, 2009, and 2010 (*Alouettes*, n.d.).

³ But I recently discovered that at least twelve of the eighteen teams in the *Ligue de Hockey Majeur du Québec* recruited their own Protestant chaplain (Arel, 2014).

in the story of the Bible)? Or maybe, God just had other plans for them. In the end, however, God came to his senses. He made Saskatchewan put too many players on the field, which then gave the Alouettes another field goal chance. Then God dutifully guided the ball through the goal posts, enabling the Alouettes win by one point (28 to 27).

Andre Agassi, in his recent book *Open*, castigated Michael Chang for the same behaviour that was exhibited by Trestman: “He thanks God – credits God – for the win, which offends me. That God should take sides in a tennis match, that God should side against me, that God should be in Chang’s box, feels ludicrous and insulting. I beat Chang and savour every blasphemous stroke.” I also think that Agassi remarked, although I cannot find the quote, “as if God doesn’t have better things to do!”

If an all-knowing, all-powerful, Creator of the universe (i.e. matter) does exist, which is, to say the least, highly improbable, are we to take seriously the assumption that He is looking down from the sky and watching the Grey Cup final?! The actions of Trestman would constitute just the nonsensical actions of one individual, but imposed team prayers during sporting events are a common occurrence. What about those players who don’t believe in God and feel uncomfortable supplicating themselves before unsubstantiated supernatural forces? To object would result in the accusation of not being a “team player”. Why are these activities not being publicly opposed? (Widdowson, 2009)⁴

I considered this blog very representative of the common opinion about praying athletes. It contains almost all the classic stereotypes; it especially takes for granted that athletes pray for winning. There are obvious antireligious biases: the existence of ‘an all-knowing, all-powerful, Creator of the Universe’ as, ‘to say the least, highly improbable’; Trestman’s actions that are considered ‘nonsensical’; ‘supernatural forces,’ ‘unsubstantiated’; and the fact that these activities must be ‘publicly opposed’. However, the blog also contains some challenging questions that can be dealt with by a theologian: Does Marc Trestman ask for ‘the laws of the universe be annulled’? Does he want God to favor ‘the *Alouettes*, at the expense of the players of the other team’? Is there a ‘wrong God’ *vs.* a true God? Does ‘praying properly’ guarantee victory? Could God prefer one team to another? Could God ‘come to his senses’? Is it God who ‘dutifully guide [s] the ball through the goal posts’? Does God have ‘better things to do’? Are team prayers ‘imposed’ before *Alouettes*’ games? Do the ‘players who don’t believe in God’ feel ‘uncomfortable supplicating themselves’? Are such players accused ‘of not being “team players”’? If Widdowson was right then I would have to agree with her and join her in her crusade against prayers before CFL games (or maybe only before *Alouettes* game; her request was not perfectly clear).

⁴ At this time, Frances Widdowson was an assistant professor and the coordinator of the Political science, Policy Studies department at the Mount Royal University in Calgary, Alberta. Frances uses a political economy perspective in her research on aboriginal and environmental policy, as well as the politics of religion. [...] She is currently working on another book (also with Albert Howard) on the social effects of religion.’ (Frances Widdowson, PhD. Assistant Professor,’ 2012)

2 Methodology

My research began in July 2011 when I interviewed Reverend Tom Paul, the *Alouettes* chaplain. He presented me to the four Christian activities that he held for the *Alouettes*⁵: a double Chapel program every game day (first for the visiting team, then for the *Alouettes*); a weekly Bible study, on a schedule depending on the players' availability; a Thanksgiving service at the Welcome Hall Mission; and spiritual guidance upon request. In fall 2011, I was allowed to observe the following *Alouettes* Christian activities: one Chapel, two Bible studies and the Thanksgiving service. I participated in these activities without recording them or taking any notes⁶. Right after each activity, I wrote down my observations as precisely as I remembered them. In spring 2012, I analyzed the results of my observations using the first stage (observation) of the spiritual praxeology method, as developed at the Faculty of Theology and the Science of Religion of the University of Montréal (Nadeau, 2007). Here are the results of my research.

3 The Seven Horizontal Dimensions of the Praxis

The first step of praxeology consists in methodically observing a praxis with his/her six empirical senses (sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste and proprioception), and in extensively describing what really happened during the praxis observed. The easiest and most efficient way to do that is to answer seven classical questions: What? Who? Where? When? How much? How? And, why?

a) What?

The Chapel was a simple worship celebrated two and a half hours before the *Alouettes* home games. It was made up of an opening prayer, a Biblical reading, some Biblical comments, and a closing prayer.

The Bible studies were held once a week, right after the *Alouettes* football practice⁷. It included informal discussions, a prayer, a commented Biblical reading, and other general information.

For Thanksgiving, some of the *Alouettes* players went to the Welcome Hall Mission in Montréal to confess

⁵ Players could also have personal religious practices. For instance, on July 12, 2012, during the Montreal *Alouettes* vs. *Calgary Stampeders* game, I observed that before the national anthem, two *Alouettes* players knelt down on their left knee on the side line, put their elbow on their right knee, bowed their head down in their hand or in their fist and stayed calm and quiet for about 30 seconds one, and the other for one minute. This is the typical position in which evangelical athletes pray; Herb Lusk of the Philadelphia Eagles was the first football player to kneel down after a touchdown on October 9, 1977 (Goldenbach, 2007). During the game, I observed an *Alouettes* kick-receiver signing the cross on himself before returning the kick. Furthermore, at the end of the game, I observed twelve players (five *Alouettes* and seven *Stampeders*) getting together at the center of the field, kneeling down on one knee and praying together (Bauer, 2012). These are visible Christian practices, but of course, players may have discrete, interior or invisible religious practices as well.

⁶ It was my way to be as discrete as possible. But you will see that my presence did not remain unnoticed and that at some point, I became part of the Praxis.

⁷ Tom Paul proposed the same Bible studies for his Church, because he 'put [s] a lot of time in them' (Bauer, 2011d)

what they are thankful for and to serve the evening meal to the homeless⁸.

b) Who?

Several actors are involved in the praxis.

First of all, there is Tom Paul, the *Alouettes* chaplain. Tom Paul is a 60-year-old, grey-haired, white male, Baptist American pastor. His mother tongue is English, but he is completely fluent in French. He served as a chaplain in the U.S. Army and he currently serves as a pastor for the Madison Baptist Church in Notre-Dame-de-Grâces, Montréal. He has been the *Alouettes* chaplain for ten years, or, as he puts it: he has spent ‘10 ans sur les lignes de côté’ (Bauer, 2011g)⁹. He was the Expos’ chaplain for the times that they played in Montréal. As a member of the *Alouettes* organization, he won three Grey cups and wears three Grey Cup rings with his name engraved on each of them. Tom Paul is very proud of what he does. When working with the *Alouettes*, he wears an *Alouettes* jersey, or an *Alouettes* cap, or the shoes offered by the *Alouettes* provider. He is the one who organizes and directs the *Alouettes* Christian activities. I felt that, it is because of his experience and his charisma that he is the one who is able to make these *Alouettes* Christian activities possible.

Many *Alouettes* players are regularly involved in the praxis. I counted fourteen players to have taken part in the Chapel; six players in the September 27 Bible study; eight players in the Thanksgiving service; and four players in the October 19 Bible study. From time to time, some other people joined the group: two *Alouettes* staff members, and one guest of the Chapel; a player’s fiancée and three female fans took part in the Thanksgiving service.

All the players who took part in these activities came from the USA; all but one were black¹⁰. They are all successful professional football players. They are fierce competitors in a tough sport who are taking high risks to earn their living. They are involved in the praxis on a voluntary basis. I can separate them in two different groups: on one side, a group of about ten players and two staff members who only took part in the Chapel before the game; on the other side, another group of about ten other players

⁸ This is a highly anticipated event by the Welcome Hall Mission. Even if it is a private event, it has a very public aspect, for the media is invited. For instance, the e-bulletin of the Welcome Hall Mission offers a picture of the *Alouettes* players and a special tribute to Anthony Calvillo: ‘First of all, a BIG thank you to the Montreal *Alouettes* for serving Thanksgiving Dinner at our Men’s Mission after a historical game at Percival Molson Stadium. Quarterback Anthony Calvillo took his traditional place serving turkey, even after breaking the all-time passing record in professional football! He was joined by his teammates who each took the time to meet and encourage some 250 men and women who’ve fallen on hard times.’ (Welcome Hall, 2011) It is relevant to note that the Welcome Hall Mission did not give any indication of the Christian motivation behind this event, which was organized by the *Alouettes* chaplain, after all.

⁹ The interview took place in Paul’s home and lasted about 90 minutes. It was held in French.

¹⁰ I observed that neither Quebecer players, nor other French-speaking players (whether white or black) took part in the praxis.

who seem very close to the chaplain and deeply involved in every *Alouettes* Christian activity¹¹.

Among all the players, I clearly need to mention Anthony Calvillo, the *Alouettes* quarterback, who was obviously playing a major role in the praxis. He is a professional football player, born in California in 1972. He is one of the most successful quarterbacks in football history. In October 2011, he broke the record for the most pro-football passing yards in American and Canadian football history. He is married and has two daughters. Both he and his wife have suffered from cancer. He is known as a Christian, and does not hesitate to confess his faith¹².

Even if they were not physically involved in the praxis, some other actors were present in a more symbolic way.

- Among the more than seventy *Alouettes* players, the large majority of them did not take part in the praxis. On September 27, I heard one player politely decline to join the Bible studies after Paul had asked him to do so. There are plenty of reasons for the players not to take part in the praxis: they could not have any religious faith or could confess to another religion¹³; they could be Christian without agreeing with Tom Paul's theology¹⁴; they could be involved in another church, etc.¹⁵.
- As another symbolic actor, I need to mention God, of course (prayers were addressed to him); the people for whom players expressed concerns and asked to pray for (a friend who lost weight suffering from a cancer; the victims of the 9/11 attacks¹⁶; the widow and the children of a former teammate who died from cancer; a player's mother who had just passed away; a player for his own wife 'who is really tired') (Bauer, 2011c).
- The *Alouettes* opponents were always symbolically present in the praxis. It was particularly obvious during the September 27 Bible study that was held in the 'Offensive and Defensive Coordination Room' with a large white board where names, photos, and information about key players of the

¹¹ I was able to appreciate their involvement in the praxis when I saw them eating their lunch or drinking fruit juice during Bible studies as they had come to study right after their football practice, the medical care and the interviews.

¹² 'Although Calvillo had grown up in a devout Catholic family in Los Puentes, California, as he grew older, he drifted farther away from his faith. But when a good friend was killed in a car accident, he began to change his attitude towards faith. "I was evaluating my life, what direction it was going in and it felt very empty and that's when God came into my life," said Calvillo. The *Alouettes* quarterback is known for his compassion and loyalty. In 2007, when his wife Alexia Kontolemos was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin lymphomas, Calvillo took a leave of absence to care for her. She is now recovered and the couple is happily raising their two daughters.' (Canadian Christianity, 2011)

¹³ Tom Paul once told me that, 'Mark Trestman est juif' (Bauer, 2011g). But this fact did not prevent him from taking part in the Chapel.

¹⁴ According to Tom Paul, there are Catholic players in the Bible studies (Bauer, 2011d).

¹⁵ When it came to charity (signing a football for a fundraising against autism), players were always ready to help.

¹⁶ The Chapel was held on Sunday September 11.

Winnipeg Blue Bombers, the *Alouettes* next opponent, were displayed (Bauer, 2011d). That afternoon, Tom Paul spoke of three different *Alouettes* opponents: at the beginning of the meeting, he congratulated the team for their win against the *Edmonton Eskimos*; during the prayer, he thanked God for having protected Anthony Calvillo ‘through his sack during the last game’; he titled the sheet of paper with the indication for the next *Alouettes* away game ‘Beat the Bombers!’; and he presented the next meetings to be held, ‘two days after we’ll beat Winnipeg’ and, ‘the day we beat Toronto’.

I cannot exclude my own role. *Nolens volens*, I was involved in the praxis I observed. At the beginning of each activity, Tom Paul introduced me as, ‘Professor Bauer from the Université de Montréal, who had written a book about the *Canadiens de Montréal* as a religion’ (Bauer, 2011e). The second time I met the team, one of the players asked me what I had observed until now during the praxis (Bauer, 2011d); and during the second Bible study, I was invited to express my own concerns for the prayer and to open the prayer.

c) When?

According to Tom Paul, Chapels have been held in the CFL since 1974. It started when some players asked to have them since they were unable to worship in their own churches on Sunday. Tom Paul has been the first *Alouettes* chaplain, since around 2002. In 2013, another pastor, Lorenzo DellaForesta succeeded him.

The Chapel took place two and a half hours before the *Alouettes* home game; it lasted about 20 minutes. The Bible studies took place during the week, after a football practice, generally on Tuesday or Wednesday, depending on the schedule of the *Alouettes*, for about 30 to 60 minutes, depending on the players’ schedule¹⁷.

Time management seemed to be a real issue. Tom Paul is really busy on Sundays and *Alouettes* players quite occupied on weekdays. Maybe that explains why, during the Chapel, Tom Paul looked twice at his watch, and why he had to ask at the beginning of the Bible Study how long the players could stay in order to set an ending time.

d) Where?

Concretely, the Chapel was held in the Officials’ locker room at the Percival-Molson Stadium; the Thanksgiving service was held at the Welcome Hall Mission’s dining room; the first Bible study was

¹⁷ For instance, on October 19, Anthony Calvillo asked for the study to begin because ‘he [had] something to do’ (Bauer, 2011c). More generally, in October, some Bible studies were postponed to enter the *Alouettes* calendar.

held in a meeting room, and the second in a locker room in the basement of the Montréal Olympic Stadium.

Judging from the rooms in which the Bible studies were held, I was under the impression that the *Alouettes* did not care a lot about the Bible studies. They agreed to them being held, but they did not provide a specific room for them. Therefore, Tom Paul had to look for an available room, and, because a lot of things happen inside the *Alouettes*, it could be hard¹⁸. The rooms he used were only functional¹⁹, and, Tom Paul had to ‘build’ the space for his own purposes²⁰.

The situation seemed different when it came to the Chapel, for which Tom Paul simply had to ask the security guard to open the Officials’ locker room. The specific room and scheduled time assigned for the Chapel gave this activity a more official status. On top of it, this peculiar status was confirmed by the presence of the *Alouettes* head coach.

e) How much?

I only heard one piece of information about money being involved in the praxis: that the CFL team chaplains are not able to travel with the team for a lack of funding. That explains why Tom Paul was celebrating a Chapel for the *Alouettes* opponents at their hotel in the morning before the *Montréal Alouettes vs. Hamilton Tigercats* home game, and why he asked the opponent’s team chaplain to celebrate the Chapel for the *Winnipeg Blue Bombers vs. Montréal Alouettes* away game.

f) How?

The *Alouettes* Christian activities implied two principal modes of communication. One was completely oral, and the other was a mix of written and oral communication.

- Everything was done in English.
- Each activity began with a long, informal time of discussion: when Tom Paul was walking across the building to the locker room, and when the actors were sitting in the room, waiting for everyone to arrive. The players felt comfortable sharing their thoughts on several topics, especially on what was happening in their life, on the people and the situations they wanted to pray for.

¹⁸ On October 19, I personally experienced the difficulty in finding the room where the Bible study was held, and the difficulty finding someone who knew where it was held.

¹⁹ The October 19 Bible study was held in an empty and cold disused locker room with concrete walls and metal lockers along the walls.

²⁰ On September 27, I helped Tom Paul arrange the chairs in a circle. Being a little bit too enthusiastic, I put twenty chairs: ‘More than needed,’ he told me (Bauer, 2011d).

- The prayers were ‘free prayers’ that were immediately composed from the players’ request, and pronounced without a written text. One player spontaneously opened the prayer, which Tom Paul then continued and closed.
- The texts (i.e. Scriptures) were an essential element in the Chapel and the Bible studies. Tom Paul gave the players a double-sided sheet of paper with a Biblical chapter written on it. The format of the three papers I saw were all the same: the name of the praxis as the header²¹; a title that Tom Paul chose (‘God Calls a Valliant Warrior,’ ‘Asking Before Acting,’ and, ‘Settling Into The Land’); the Biblical reference of the chapter (Judges 6 for the CFL Chapel; Joshua 9 and Joshua 13 for the Bible studies); a small introduction to the Biblical chapter and the Biblical text itself. For the second Bible study, Tom Paul handed out an additional page called ‘Applications From Joshua 13’.
- During each activity, a Biblical reading was read aloud, one verse at a time, by the players. Tom Paul made comments after each one or two verses. From time to time, he read the verse a second time, drew attention to certain terms or expressions, gave some information on a Hebrew or Greek word, or asked questions to the players.

As an alternative mode of communication, the actors’ body language is worth mentioning. For instance, when it came to greet the players, Tom Paul acted like an insider and used several ‘secret handshakes’: shaking hands with the thumb out, pressing shoulder to shoulder, pounding it, etc.²²; and when it came to pray, prayers sat down, removed their caps, kept their head down, and joined hands. Some of them leaned slightly forward.

g) Why?

I never heard anything about the praxis’s explicit objectives. When I asked Tom Paul to define his role inside the *Alouettes*, he told me that, as a chaplain, he was taking care of ‘the spiritual life’ of the players (others are in charge of their body, and others of their mind). He was responding to ‘the need of the players’. As an army chaplain, he was ‘serving the platoon’, but at the same time, showing that ‘[he is] convinced of what [he] believes’ (Bauer, 2011g).

Inside the praxis, I can identify some implicit objectives; there are different objectives according to different actors:

- The *Alouettes* organization could consider that the Christian activities help to improve the players’

²¹ ‘*Alouettes* Bible Study’ but ‘CFL Chapel,’ because the same Chapel is held for both teams, even if separately.

²² Being an outsider, the players and Tom Paul simply shook my hand in a very usual manner.

efficiency. The praxis could act as an alibi to help them through tough moments and decisions. It was the case when the chaplain was invited to comfort a player after the *Alouettes* had cut him, for example.

- The Christian activities could help the players in making a connection between football and faith, and in nourishing the players' faith. The private frame of the praxis could allow them to express personal concerns that may otherwise be difficult to share in a locker room or to confess in front of the coaches. In such a tough sport, I could imagine that the players could look for God's protection.
- Tom Paul is certainly happy and proud to be the *Alouettes* chaplain, but he does not take advantage of his position in any way. For instance, on September 11, Tom Paul explained to me what his Sunday will look like: early in the morning, he will go to the *Hamilton Tigercats* hotel to celebrate their Chapel; at 10:00 AM, he will go to the Percival-Molson Stadium to celebrate the *Alouettes* Chapel; then he will leave the Stadium to celebrate the worship in his Church. Knowing that he will be late, someone in his Church will have already begun the worship, waiting for him to arrive. Tom Paul will preach and let someone end the worship, as he will have to be back at the stadium at 1:00 PM, for the beginning of the game (Bauer, 2011e)²³.
- Outsiders could think that the *Alouettes* Christian activities could be the *Alouettes'* attempt to monopolize God in making them victorious.

4 Five Vertical Dimensions of the Praxis

Having described the *Alouettes* Christian activities, I can now elaborate on the values that they reveal or hide. Using the method of Spiritual Praxeology, I want to reveal the five different levels of value found in the *Alouettes* Christian activities: the symbolic value given to the material artefacts used in the praxis, the personal development of the actors involved in the praxis, their collective development, the issue of ethics and, last, but, of course, not least, the spiritual value.

a) Material Artefacts

The *Alouettes* Christian activities did not require a lot of material artefacts. Most of them were only useful: metal folding chairs or benches, sheets of paper, etc. However, that did not prevent the actors involved in the praxis from giving symbolic values to those artefacts. Later, I will give two examples, but I want to begin by pointing out a significant absence in artefacts.

²³ Certainly joking, he added that his congregation 'prays for him not be ticketed' (Bauer, 2011e).

In all activities I observed, I have not seen any kind of religious symbols: no crucifix, no cross, no pious images, no symbolic fish, nothing. This probably denotes the Protestant dimension of the praxis organized by Tom Paul. The majority of Reformers were iconoclasts and the majority of Protestants stayed very cautious of using religious artefacts, except for the Bible, as they are afraid that they will lead them to idolatry. But, precisely because the *Alouettes* Christian activities are Protestant activities, I was surprised not to see any Bibles either. Tom Paul used copies of type-scripted Biblical texts, probably for a double practical reason: first, it could be difficult for the players to bring their own Bible (and a heavy-duty for Paul to bring ten Bibles with him!); and second, the use of those copies allowed Tom Paul to add a title and his own comments to the Biblical texts.

There is one material artefact that is worth being presented: a football. Before the September 27 Bible study, Tom Paul placed a brand-new football in the middle of the circle of chairs. He explained the situation to the players; one of his friends was working for a Non-Profit Organization that fights autism; he asked him that the *Alouettes* players sign the football that will later be sold in an auction. All the players, even a player who was only passing by, agreed to do what he asked for very easily. Obviously, at that moment, the ball became something other than a simple ball to play football with. By signing it, the players turned the ball into a high-valued artefact that will be sold for a high price, and help to fight autism. But that day, that ball also worked as a conversation starter. A player revealed that one of his family members was suffering from autism. He informed Tom Paul that he was ready to give more for this cause. And, when some other players asked him for some details about the illness, he explained that autism is like having a child's mind in an adult body, and gave an example of this: an autistic person can put water to boil and forget about it.

'Football,' as a concept, also played a major role during the praxis. All the *Alouettes* Christian activities depended on football, and were built around football. Chapel and Bible study time were set according to the schedule of the games and practices. In his Biblical comments, Tom Paul used sports metaphors: 'If you need something, go for God' (as in 'Go for a first down!' or 'Go for a touch down!') (Bauer, 2011d), or 'fifty-seven plus three' (an expression often used by Mark Trestman, because the last three minutes of a football game are quite different from the first fifty-seven) (Bauer, 2011c); and, during Thanksgiving, several players affirmed how important football was for them: 'I am thankful to be here in Canada playing football'; 'I am thankful for the opportunity to play football'; 'It is a blessing to be on the field'; football is 'a blessing' (Bauer, 2011f).

b) Personal Development

It is not easy to know the exact impact that the praxis has on the players' personal life. If it does have an

impact, it will be in the long term, which is difficult to evaluate.

However, the praxis gave the players the possibility to include religious activities in their sporting agenda, and helped them play according to their faith²⁴. Bible studies could be thought of as a Christian education that contributes in informing the players about the Bible and in helping them deepen their faith. Chapel could also contribute in making the players and staff members ready for a game. This could explain why the *Alouettes* provided a specific time and a specific room for this activity, and also, why the head coach and other staff members took part in it. A player could even feel that taking part in the Chapel could be necessary, or at least useful, because of his place on the team. The service at the Welcome Hall Mission could allow the players to give back a part of what they have received²⁵.

But the praxis also gave the players and staff members an opportunity to confess their faith in the inner circle of the *Alouettes*, to the homeless and, through the media, to the general public. In the end, it could also help the players to trust each other more by giving them the opportunity to share personal and sometimes intimate information about each other.

Believing in God could give the players the ability to recognize that football is not the most important thing in their life. In Tom Paul's words, the players can 'mettre en contexte l'importance d'une partie', and discover that, 'la vie est plus large' (Bauer, 2011g). A player who trusts in God could play better football because he will not be as stressed by the weight of the plays. Anthony Calvillo was certainly looking for such wisdom in his life, when, at the end of the October 19 Bible study, he asked Tom Paul for a Biblical verse about the possibility to leave his worries to God (Bauer, 2011c).

c) Collective Development

There are three different communities that are concerned by the praxis: at a close level, the group of players that have taken part in the *Alouettes* Christian activities; at an intermediate level, the *Alouettes* organization, and at a broad level, the CFL. Of course, all three levels are totally imbricated. The CFL policy has an impact on the CFL teams and CFL players; the *Alouettes'* actions have an impact on the *Alouettes* players and on the CFL results; and the way the players play has an impact on the *Alouettes* results and the CFL image. The collective development of those three levels depends on each other. For example, by encouraging each team to have its own chaplain²⁶, the CFL certainly contributes to the

²⁴ For the relation between sport and religion, and especially the possibility to insert sport into religion or religion into sport: (Bauer, 2011a)

²⁵ According to Tom Paul, a former *Alouettes* player had been homeless for a period of time; each year, he came to the Welcome Hall Mission to give hope to the homeless people (Bauer, 2011g).

²⁶ When I was looking for the 'chaplain' on the CFL website, there were seven pages (CFL, n.d.). I learned that Brent Kassian was the Eskimo's chaplain when they won the Grey Cup in 2011; he is called 'The most unknown member of the Eskimos'.

collective development of the Christian players; having sanctioned Tom Paul, the *Alouettes* meets the CFL's expectations and serves the players' spiritual needs²⁷; and of course, spiritually strong players help to make the *Alouettes* be a better team, therefore increasing the CFL's development in the same way.

The praxis gathered a group of *Alouettes* players and staff members on a voluntary basis. But, at the same time, it also divided the team in three different groups: players who were involved in all the activities; players and staff members who only took part in the Chapel; and, players and staff members who were not involved in any of *Alouettes* Christian activities. The players' involvement did not occur randomly: the more demanding an activity was, the fewer players were involved in it. This is why more players took part in the Chapel than in the Bible studies.

I can make some observations on the relation between the actors:

- Tom Paul showed a lot of loyalty towards the *Alouettes* organization: he always wore clothes with the *Alouettes* logo, for example.
- Obviously, there is a congruence (or at least, a mutual interest) between Tom Paul and the *Alouettes*. But, even if the *Alouettes* do consider the spiritual needs of their players, they relegate Christian activities to almost all other activities: football practices, of course, but also medical cares, team meetings, and the media²⁸. It is clear to me that the sporting environment takes precedence over the religious one.
- *Alouettes* Christian activities are performed for a rather small group of *Alouettes* Christian players and staff members²⁹. But of course, players could have a religious or a spiritual life outside of Paul's Chapel program and Bible studies³⁰.
- For Tom Paul, the most important thing is 'the service to the players'. He knows how to balance his own faith and the players' needs.
- Players that took part in the Bible studies showed a lot of trust in Tom Paul and in each other³¹.

²⁷ Some players, but not all the players, some spiritual needs, but not all the spiritual needs. The Montreal *Alouettes* take care of the religious needs of the Christian (protestant) players. Tom Paul told me that he looked for a Catholic priest to be his partner, but without any success (Bauer, 2011g).

²⁸ For instance, during the October 19 Bible study, the *Alouettes* Chief media came and asked a player to follow him, which the player did. One more time, I observed that the place that the Chapel program holds is slightly different; it is more important and holds a more official place in the preparation of the game.

²⁹ Tom Paul is the official *Alouettes* chaplain, and he has a monopoly on religious praxis inside the *Alouettes*. His praxis is the only official religious praxis among the *Alouettes*.

³⁰ In fact, I do not know anything about the players' faith or the players' religious life outside the praxis.

³¹ During Thanksgiving Service, a player confessed: 'Those guys, my teammates are like brothers to me'; another professed: 'Thanksgiving is all about family. Anthony Calvillo is my Grandfather. We are family. It is not about ourselves' (Bauer,

They did not hesitate to discuss personal issues, especially problems happening in their life: worries, sickness, and death. Tom Paul showed a lot of solidarity with the players. He did not have any power over the players: ‘Moi, je ne peux pas les couper’ (Bauer, 2011g)³². And the players felt it.

- There was a great bond between Tom Paul and the *Alouettes*’ quarter back Anthony Calvillo. Tom Paul considered Calvillo to be a lieutenant. On the field, Calvillo played a leading role among his teammates. And, when Tom Paul could not be with the team, Calvillo seemed to take charge of the spiritual life of the team, especially for the away game. His age and his faith gave him a special status. For instance, during the Bible studies, he did not read any Bible verses, and neither Tom Paul nor his teammates expected him to.

d) Ethical Issues

At the next level, I have to observe the ethical issues revealed (or hidden) in the praxis. Some of these issues are explicitly expressed in the praxis itself, but others have to be developed from the activities.

By definition, the *Alouettes* Christian activities belong to the religious field; but, the Bible studies can also be considered to have had a more social impact when they allowed the players to talk about their personal life, their family, and their friends, for example. The Thanksgiving service had a religious aspect (many testimonies gave thanks to God), but also had a more general, spiritual aspect (players were also thankful for playing with their teammates), and a socio-political aspect (players fed those who were hungry).

At the beginning of the first Bible study I observed, a player asked me what I was interested in. I answered that I would like to know how you could be Christian, and play such a tough sport. The player told me that this was a basic question. Before the player could give me his own answer, Tom Paul took over the question: ‘It especially concerns the defensive end whose role is to rush the opposite quarterback³³. But the most important is to try to give the best you can. It would be disrespectful vis-à-vis the opponent not to do his maximum’ (Bauer, 2011d).

I understood the sentence, ‘to do the best you can’, in a more collective way. Endorsing the fact that football is all about winning, Tom Paul scheduled his activities not only according to the game calendar, but depending on the *Alouettes*’ wins: the next *Alouettes* Christian activities will be held ‘two days after we beat Winnipeg’, or ‘the day we beat Toronto’; and when preparing a Chapel for a game in Winnipeg,

2011f).

³² Ironically, several of the players who were taking part in the praxis were actually cut at the end of the 2011–2012 season.

³³ During his Thanksgiving talk, a player affirmed, ‘to break the defence you just have to want it’. (Bauer, 2011f).

Tom Paul entitled the information paper he gave to Anthony Calvillo, ‘Beat the Bombers!’ (Bauer, 2011d).

When the *Alouettes* players have to beat their opponents, they are called to sacrifice themselves for the team, and to play, ‘pour la gloire de Dieu’. Similar to when John the Baptist had to, ‘make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight’ (Mark 1:3), players have to prepare the way for their teammates (Bauer, 2011g)³⁴.

During the Chapel, Tom Paul made two connections to the outside world. He explained that a Christian should fight poverty not with economical weapons, but with spiritual ones: ‘by being honest, keeping his promises, avoiding debt’³⁵. And, he spoke about the 9/11 attacks, but in a very specific way. Drawing some parallel with the Biblical chapter of the day (Joshua 9), he affirmed that, ‘We do not need to defend God, because God is able to defend himself, but not Baal’³⁶ (Bauer, 2011e).

There are other ethical issues that are probably more hidden by the praxis rather than revealed by the praxis. The *Alouettes* football team is a business that has been built to earn money for their owner. For ten years, they have been a successful franchise of the CFL, the self-proclaimed ‘most dominant team of the decade’ (*Alouettes*, n.d.). Regarding those economic issues, the role played by the Christian activities is unclear or uncertain. I could imagine that the *Alouettes* would consider the topic of economics legitimate, as long as it helps the players to play better football and to contribute to winning more games. Even if it is difficult to identify the exact role of the chaplain in the recent successes, the *Alouettes* should consider the fact that their domination in Canadian football in the last decade coincides exactly with the enrolment of Tom Paul as their chaplain. Similarly, I felt that some potential conflicts could arise between the chaplain and the *Alouettes* when (or if) the *Alouettes* used their chaplain for their own purpose; for instance, to legitimize their actions, specifically when they are being very selective and tough on their players³⁷.

e) Relation with God

Here comes the most interesting part of my work, and without any doubt, the more specific one: what images of God, and what kind of relation with him, do the *Alouettes* Christian activities reveal or hide?

³⁴ The metaphor works particularly well when I consider the role of the down linemen whose role is to block the opponent’s players in order to ‘make ready the way’ of their running back.

³⁵ The mention of this very specific issue led me to think that it could be a real problem among football players.

³⁶ In Judges, chapter 6, Joash, the father of Gideon, the ‘mighty warrior’ (v.12), the one who has to ‘save Israel out of Midian’s hand’ (v.14) ironically asked the ‘hostile crowd around him’: ‘Are you going to plead Baal’s cause? Are you trying to save him? [...] If Baal really is a god [with a small “g”], he can defend himself when someone breaks down his altar.’ (v.31).

³⁷ It could be the case when Tom Paul had to explain to a player that was fired that, ‘il peut rebondir ailleurs’ (Bauer, 2011g), which is true, but it could be seen as an attempt to justify decisions taken only to serve the *Alouettes*’ interest.

At first, I began to analyze God's characteristics according to Tom Paul (Bauer, 2011g):

- 'Dieu est souverain', he does not cheer for any team, 'même si je crois qu'il est avec les *Alouettes*'³⁸. God is neither interested in the results of a game, nor is he interested in who wins the Grey Cup. But God is interested in football because he loves the people and the people are interested in football.
- Players have to sacrifice themselves for the team and play 'ultimement, pour la gloire de Dieu'. As John the Baptist had to 'make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight' (Mark 1:3), players have to prepare the way for their teammates³⁹.
- Paul and the players can pray for God to protect them. Players can ask God to help them maximize their skills, in order to play a perfect game: 'by playing by the rules, showing respect for their opponents, playing at full capacity, providing a full effort every play, and supporting their teammates'.
- Believing in God gives the players the capacity to recognize that playing football is not the ultimate meaning of life. In the eyes of God, the person is more important than the player.

Second, I will mention the different ways by which Tom Paul and Anthony Calvillo name God:

- During the Chapel, Tom Paul addressed his prayer to God the 'Father,' the 'Lord,' the 'Father in Heaven,' whom he thanked for 'this sunny Sunday, perfect for a football game', and for the 'so skilled players' and asked God to make the players 'useful for [him]' (Bauer, 2011e); during the Bible studies, he prayed to 'our Father in Heaven' (Bauer, 2011d).
- For Thanksgiving, Anthony Calvillo expressed his thanks to Jesus in those words: 'My Lord and Savior Jesus Christ' (Bauer, 2011f)⁴⁰.

Third, I will indicate what Paul taught the players about God.

- First of all, I think it is not only by chance that Tom Paul chose to study books from the Old Testament: Judges, for the Chapel, and Joshua, for the Bible study⁴¹. When it comes to teaching the Bible to athletes, it is easier to draw lessons from the Old Testament's books that speak of conquest and warrior, exactly like what Judges and Joshua teach.

³⁸ Of course, the last sentence was ironic. In defending his statement, Paul quoted Joshua 5:13. When Joshua asked 'a man', who could be God himself: 'Are you for us or for our adversaries?' He said, 'No; rather I indeed come now *as* captain of the host of the Lord.'

³⁹ The metaphor works particularly well when I consider the role of the down linemen whose role is to block opponent players in order to 'make ready the way' of their running back.

⁴⁰ I do not want to stretch out these differences. In Protestant theology, God, as a father, fulfils the prayers, but God as a son, saves.

⁴¹ Tom Paul explained to me that he had sometimes chosen books from the New Testament.

- According to Judges, chapter 6, it is God that made Gideon (who ‘was threshing wheat in a wine press to keep it from the Midianites’ v.11) a ‘mighty warrior’ (v.12). Gideon became this ‘mighty warrior’ only because God was with him (‘I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites together’ v.16). More precisely, Tom Paul taught that the expression ‘the angel of the LORD’ refers to the pre-existing Christ (Bauer, 2011d).
- When commenting Joshua 9 (a lesson entitled, ‘Asking Before Acting’), Tom Paul explained that Gideon forgot to ask (or preferred not to ask) what God’s will was before ‘agreeing to a treaty of peace with the Gibeonites’ (Paul, 2011a). Applying this to real life, Paul suggested that the players ask God three things before acting: what are ‘His will? His way? His time?’ (Bauer, 2011d).
- Regarding the October 19 Bible study (entitled ‘Settling Into The Land’), I noted two major aspects. First, Tom Paul underlined that even Biblical heroes were allowed to see when God’s promises became effective: for instance, Moses died before entering the Promised Land. Second, Tom Paul drew a parallel between two different contexts, the Promised Land where Israel tolerated the presence of idolatrous people⁴², and the Christian *Alouettes* players: being ‘Borderline Believer’ will put the players’ Christian faith at risk. Tom Paul drew parallels between ‘Israel’s Challenge’: ‘Continue Fighting Pockets of Resistance’; ‘Biblical Principle’: ‘Standing Against the World, the Flesh & the Devil’; and ‘Application to Us’: ‘Persevering in the Christian Life.’
- When a player requested that Tom Paul prayed for his dead mother, Tom Paul explained that it would be worst to die without any possibilities of knowing whether you will live with God or not. But when a sick person dies and knows that she is saved, then: ‘Yes! It hurts because she is dead, but it is almost a relief.’ (Bauer, 2011d).

So which God do the *Alouettes* Christian activities reveal or hide?

The *Alouettes* Christian activities’ God is a father who loves his children, whatever they do for a living (playing football for the *Alouettes* included); the *Alouettes* Christian activities’ God is a sovereign who can help people (football players included) to do their best, even more than they think they can do; the *Alouettes* Christian activities’ God is a generous God who gives players skills and opportunities; but the *Alouettes* Christian activities’ God is also a demanding God who likes to be asked and to be thanked.

The *Alouettes* Christian activities’ Christ was already active in the Old Testament.

According to the *Alouettes* Christian activities, Biblical heroes are role models for today’s Christian.

According to the *Alouettes* Christian activities, Christian life is a fight against human natural tendencies.

⁴² ‘Because this was the Land where God would send His Messiah, it was to be a place of purity, and the Israelites were to be a “light to the nations”. The presence of unvanquished enemies in the land would diminish this light’ (Paul, 2011b).

And, according to the *Alouettes* Christian activities, the most important aspect of a Christian life is preparing to live in death with God.

5 Conclusion

In my introduction, I have listed some questions inspired by the reading of Widdowson's blog. After having observed the *Alouettes* Christian activities, I am able to answer some questions, but not everyone. For instance, I do not know if Marc Trestman asked for 'the laws of the universe to be annulled', or if God favors 'the *Alouettes*, at the expense of the players of the other team', or if God 'has better things to do'.

But I do know that neither Tom Paul, nor the *Alouettes* Christian players asked God to 'dutifully guide the ball through the goal posts', neither did they believe that 'praying properly' guaranteed them victory, nor did they believe that God preferred one team to another. Also, I observed that during Christian activities Tom Paul, the *Alouettes* player, and the staff members never ever prayed to win. Tom Paul did not even pretend to monopolize God for the *Alouettes*' wins. That is why he was able to celebrate a Chapel for the *Alouettes* opponent.

And, considering that the *Alouettes* players that took part in the Christian activities are only a small minority, and considering the difficulties that Tom Paul had to encounter while finding a room and a time to give his Bible studies, I know that neither the Chapel nor the Bible studies are 'imposed'. Therefore, I have difficulties to imagine that a player who does not participate in the Chapel could be accused 'of not being "a team player"?'

In the end, the *Alouettes* Christian activities gather athletes humble enough to admit that they need God's help; the *Alouettes* Christian activities gather athletes who want to worship together, to study the Bible together, to share their faith with each other and to help others together, on a schedule that is convenient for them, and with a chaplain who knows who they are and what they need.

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Abstract

This paper aims at clarifying what kind of theology a Christian chaplain transmits to football players. It is grounded for a month-long observation inside the Christian Praxis of the *Alouettes*, the Montréal Canadian Football League team: prayer, chapel, Biblical study, and charity. The method of Spiritual Praxeology was used to treat the observation, by organizing the data according to seven structural questions (what, who where, when, why, how, how much?) then by elaborating the values inside the praxis in five degrees: material artefacts, personal and collective developments, ethical issues, relations to God. The research shows that the Montréal *Alouettes* Christian Praxis is not aimed to ask God to make the team win, but rather to let the Christian players be humble enough to ask God's help in order to become as good as they can be.

Key words:

Sport, religion, football, Christianity, pastoral activities, Spiritual Praxeology