

---

## SPORTS CHAPLAINCY IN A SECULARIZED SPORTS CULTURE<sup>1</sup>

**Olivier Bauer (Institut lémanique de théologie pratique, Université de Lausanne)**

**Sandrine Ray (Athletes in Action, Institut lémanique de théologie pratique, Université de Lausanne)**

---

Bauer, O., & Ray, S. (2019, octobre 26). *Sports Chaplaincy in a Secularized Sports Culture* [Conférence]. 2nd Global Congress on Sport and Christianity, Calvin University and Hope College.

---

### Abstract

Ministering as a sports chaplain in Switzerland isn't easy. In a society where religious beliefs and practices are rarely openly expressed outside private life, the sports culture appears as an especially secularized environment where God has no place. Therefore, sports federations and clubs are very reluctant to welcome or develop sports chaplaincy. However, Olympian Sandrine Ray is involved as a sports chaplain particularly in the French-speaking part of Switzerland with the Christian organization 'Athletes in Action'. She has gained access to the athletes through major sports events and training venues, and continuing to play and train in floorball and ice hockey.

Based on Sandrine Ray's own experience and on Olivier Bauer's research in the sports research group at the University of Lausanne, our presentation will explain why it's so difficult to minister as a sports chaplain in Switzerland, and what sports chaplaincy can be provided in this context. We will also present some French resources useful to develop sports chaplaincy in a secularized sports culture.

## 1. What Is the Religious Situation in Switzerland?

Switzerland is a small country in the center of Western Europe. It's a federal state with 26 'cantons' – i.e. states or provinces – and one peculiarity: the country is divided in three areas, according to the language. The largest area – including Bern the capital, and Zurich the main city – is German-speaking; there is a French-speaking area around Geneva and Lausanne; and, in the south an Italian- and Romanche-

---

<sup>1</sup> We want to thank Dr Charles Edward Atkins, Director of the Master of Professional Studies program at Sing Sing Correctional Facility, who carefully edited our text.

speaking area. Our presentation deals specifically with sports chaplaincy in the French-speaking part of Switzerland where both Sandrine and I are living and working.

Even to summarize the long and complicated religious history of Switzerland would be too complicated for such a paper. But it's important to be aware of the present religious situation. According to the Federal Statistical Office, in 2016, there were 1,682,767 inhabitants in the French-speaking part of Switzerland. Among them 61.4% were Christians; and among them, 40% were Roman Catholic, 15.9% belonged to a Mainline Protestant Church – a Reformed Church heir of Ulrich Zwingli and Jean Calvin – and 5.5% to another Christian Community – evangelical, old Catholic, orthodox, etc. —. 30% answered not having any religious affiliation.

That is it for the statistics. But if we dig deeper, we find that Switzerland held a rather paradoxical or schizophrenic relation to religion. In Switzerland, (Christianism is) Christian organizations are in the public sector (a public affair); almost every canton considers Roman Catholic and Mainline Protestant Churches as being included in the domain of public service. That's why, for example, public money pays pastors and priests and cities own most of the church buildings. But at the same time, in Switzerland there is no place for the public expression of faith. It has been relegated to intimate and private expression.

## 2. Where is Faith in Switzerland?

The Swiss Protestant theologian, Félix Moser described three 'ways of investing our society' or three spheres (Moser, 2000, p. 208). Living in every sphere requires a specific and adapted behavior.

- Four dimensions characterize the public sphere: 'public' means open to everybody (as in 'public event'), providing services to all citizens ('public service'), being recognized by the entire population ('public figure'), and being open to general opinion ('public opinion') (Moser, 2000, p. 209-210).
- The private sphere, typically home or the family, is 'as a place of withdrawal and protection from the eyes of others', a place where one can express feelings (Moser, 2000, p. 209).
- But according to Moser, there is still a third sphere which is intimacy. Characterized as 'the most secret of ourselves', intimacy is the place 'where an authentic relationship with God can be forged'. (Moser, 2000, p. 208)

Félix Moser limiting faith or spiritual life to the sphere of intimacy isn't surprising. On the contrary, it reveals a general Swiss conception of faith, and corresponds to a classical Protestant conception of faith. Faith isn't a public affair; faith isn't even a private affair that families practice together and discuss at home; faith is an intimate affair that involves only God and the believer. And what happens in

intimacy has to remain in intimacy. Moser himself characterizing the behavior in the sphere of intimacy as ‘linked to secrecy’ and keeping, ‘a kind of inexpressibility’. (Moser, 2000, p. 210)

For such reasons, discussions about religious belongings and beliefs remain difficult to engage, whereas sport is a public theme. Physical practices, sport topics and results will often be discussed in all different types of population groups.

The connection between sport and faith is nonexistent and the Swiss French-speaking culture is inclined to keep both spheres safely separated. Sports chaplaincy is and can be this bridge between both spheres. With this in mind, how can chaplaincy find its place in the world of sport?

### **3. How can Chaplaincy find its Place when Sport is Public and Religious Belonging is Intimate?**

In order to respond to this question, it’s important to understand the sports culture in Switzerland.

Switzerland categorizes sport as leisure. The most popular sports in Switzerland are the professional sports, such as football, men’s ice hockey, skiing or tennis and they have large media coverage. The other sports have small media coverage and are considered to be hobbies. Most of the athletes, even the elite athletes are amateurs. The venues for practicing sports are mainly private clubs led by volunteers. Because of this, the entourage of an athlete during his/her practice is usually restricted to managers, coaches and sometimes physiotherapists. In these amateur structures, nobody gives a lot of consideration to other professions in sport, such as mental health coaches, equipment managers, chaplains, etc.

Paradoxically, despite what has just been described, top athletes are living and training in the French-speaking part of Switzerland. Moreover, the headquarters of many of the international sports federations are found in Lausanne and its surrounding region. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) is itself based in Lausanne, along with the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS). For such reasons, many important decisions about sport are being discussed in Lausanne. Switzerland, from its central position within Europe is also often organizing world class competitions in various sports.

This situation emphasizes the necessity for sports chaplaincy and the role of sports ministers. But the question remains: In this context of secularized and amateur sports culture, how can chaplaincy come alongside to provide services to athletes, clubs and sporting events?

### **4. How can French-speaking Theology produce Sports Chaplaincy?**

As there are very few considerations about sports chaplaincy in French-speaking theology, it could be

---

interesting to discuss some other chaplaincies, especially chaplaincy in health care institutions, which is widely studied<sup>2</sup>.

The Swiss Theologian and Psychologist of Religion Pierre-Yves Brandt describes three types of chaplaincy and ministering in health institutions according to whether they recognize, concede or deny religion and spirituality.

The first type is a religious institution for example, a hospital led by a Church. ‘Spiritual care constitutes a part of the health system’ (Brandt, 2016, p. 17). The medical and nursing staff are in charge while supported by the chaplaincy staff. However, the situation looks totally different in secular health institutions. They relegate religious specialists ‘to the margins of the health care system’ (Brandt, 2016, p. 19). This second type includes institutions that allow ‘external religious intervention’ as an ‘extra option’ without any medical interest (Brandt, 2016, p. 22). Brandt does an in-depth study of these first two types. The third type is an institution which sponsors chaplaincy, believing that spiritual care performed by practitioners is an important part of health care (Brandt, 2016, p. 24-25).

We can easily transfer this tripartite model to sports organizations: some clubs or some sports programs are led by a church, a synagogue or a mosque and religion is included inside the whole institution where everyone ministers in and through every activity. Some clubs host a chaplaincy program which is responsible for ministering and includes a multifaith center where chaplains are allowed to minister. Some leagues or clubs welcome or tolerate chaplains working independently inside or on the fringes of the organization.

However in regard to French-speaking Switzerland, we must add a fourth type. Sports organizations are secular and consequently they don’t provide any chaplaincy programs; they don’t want any minister involved either inside the organization, or on its outer rim.

## **5. What are the main models of Chaplaincy in French-speaking Switzerland?**

Due to this social context, the primary role of a sports chaplain is to connect the public and intimate spheres, sport and religion, sport and faith. This dynamic produces two models of sports chaplaincy in the French-speaking Switzerland that are very different.

---

<sup>2</sup> We borrow this idea to Stefany Zbinden, Undergraduate Student at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Lausanne (Zbinden, 2019)

## 5.1. Public and Private Chaplaincy

It's very rare that a club or a sports event would create an official position in chaplaincy. Often the decision to accept an offer for chaplaincy services depends on one key person, and most often on a foreign leader from a culture already convinced of the usefulness of Sports Chaplaincy. The position then usually lasts only as long as this key person remains in the club or in the organization committee of the event. There are a few examples of this in Switzerland: Genève-Servette Hockey Club, an elite club, hired a chaplain. The Engadin Ski Marathon holds a church service to start off with the event. The National Sports Centre at Macolin and the Official Swiss Olympic Association training center in Saint Moritz, offer an Athlete Service Center providing physiotherapy and chaplaincy services from Athletes in Action.

The last model of public chaplaincy in this region are the chaplaincy services requested by clubs or athletes due to critical incidents (suicide in a team, loss of a relative, injuries, etc.).

The challenges for providing sports chaplains in this region do not only come from the sports world. Even though sports organizations are reluctant to hire a chaplain, even if there were more positions available, it would still be difficult to provide enough ministers, due to the lack of trained sports chaplains.

## 5.2. Intimate Chaplaincy

Chaplaincy services in clubs or sports events are being offered 'unofficially' most of the time, meaning that the chaplain's primary role for his/her presence in the sport isn't as a chaplain, but as a player, an official, a coach, a volunteer, a manager, a therapist, etc. Through this time of service, the chaplain will gain trust from the different actors in this sports field. It's mainly through critical incidents or crisis that people involved in sport will understand and perceive the need for chaplaincy services and look for it. His/her services as a chaplain will often be accepted when critical incidents, crisis or other situations occur for which such services are requested. Or simply he or she could take questions about some religious or spiritual topic.

Chaplains in the French part of Switzerland are also asked to give support to individual athletes through contacts in the world of sport. Churches and Christian communities are also sometimes directing young athletes or parents to the sports chaplain for support, counseling or mentoring.

## 6. How to be a Sports Chaplain in French-speaking Switzerland?

Considering that there is usually mistrust towards a church representative or a religiously open person in

the French part of Switzerland, it's tough for a chaplain to enter the world of sport.

But what is seen first as adversity can become an opportunity for chaplains to be more 'Christlike' in their service to athletes. Just as when Jesus came to earth he was living among the people and serving them, close to the ones in need rather than to the religious, chaplains need to 'become flesh' in this secularized world of sport, to be involved in sport and to walk alongside the people in sport over a long period of time.

Therefore, the main traits of character for a chaplain to be accepted in the world of sport are

1. to be involved, present, flexible, and ready to give support to various needs;
2. to have integrity or have a so-called 'beyond reproach' attitude;
3. be faithfully present over a long period of time;
4. and to have 'servant heart' attitude.

If and when a sports institution or event welcomes and accepts the services offered by a chaplain, the character and attitudes of the chaplain will be observed and then play a decisive role for this service to become regularly and permanently part of the sports institutions.

'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.' John 1.14

## 7. Bibliography

- Bauer, O. (2019). *Pray, Play, Win... Or Lose! Field Research inside the Montréal Alouettes Christian Praxis*. Retrieved from [https://serval.unil.ch/notice/serval:BIB\\_604A3E7F3EEB](https://serval.unil.ch/notice/serval:BIB_604A3E7F3EEB)
- Brandt, P.-Y. (2016). L'accompagnement spirituel en milieu hospitalier exige-t-il des compétences spécifiques? In P.-Y. Brandt & J. Besson (Eds.), *Spiritualité en milieu hospitalier* (pp. 15–34). Genève : Labor et Fides.
- Maigre, A. (Ed.). (2019). *Le sport ma foi* (Vol. 49). Lausanne : Revue des Cèdres.
- Bauer, O. (2019). Articuler sport et religion : Exclure, inclure, confondre. *Revue Des Cèdres*, (49), 9–18.
  - Maigre, A. (2019). Qu'est-ce que la spiritualité dans le sport? *Revue Des Cèdres*, (49), 27–38.
  - Ray, S. (2019). L'aumônerie en milieu sportif. *Revue Des Cèdres*, (49), 19–22.
- Moser, F. (2000). Les rites, révélateurs de notre vie en société. In B. Kaempf (Ed.), *Rites et ritualités* (pp. 205–222). Paris : Cerf.
- Zbinden, S. (janvier 2020). Dieu : Passeur décisif? Enquête auprès de trois aumônières et aumôniers en Suisse romande et en Angleterre. *Les Cahiers de l'ILTP [en ligne]*, 44 pages.



---

<http://wp.unil.ch/lescahiersiltp/accompagner/s-zbinden-dieu-passeur-decisif-2020/>