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Joseph L. Price. *Rounding the Bases: Baseball and Religion in America.* Macon: Mercer University Press, 2006. xi + 260 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-86554-999-9.

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Playing and Praying at the Church of Baseball?

Baseball bores me–to death. On those rare occasions when I attend a game, the between-inning amusements become far more entertaining than the game itself. So if baseball pulses with transcendent power, I have not yet noticed it. But I have noticed the legions of fans that seem transfixed by the game, speaking with hushed tones and reverence about baseball's great moments, locations, and people. *Rounding the Bases* is successful because Joseph L. Price artfully uses the tools of religious studies to describe this fascination. He insists that baseball is more than just fun and games; it is instead a unique denomination of American civil religion. Whether baseball fans or not, scholars interested in athletics, popular culture, and religion will benefit from reading this book.

Chapter 1 surveys the history of religion and baseball in America, paying close attention to how the muscular Christian movement of the early twentieth century largely rejected Puritan-inspired prohibitions against sports. This set into motion a tendency of mixing playing and praying to the point where, now, baseball parks occasionally become sacred space, as evidenced" by "Faith Nights." Started in the minor leagues, these popular promotional events showcase Christian rock bands, player testimonies, and even biblical bobble-head figures. Chapter 2 returns to the muscular Christian era, but instead of mainline Protestantism, Price focuses on the House of David, an obscure Christian millennial group based in southern Michigan. In 1914, community leaders started a traveling baseball team. Comprised of men who adhered to the group's prescription to neither cut their hair nor shave their beards, the players were both uncommonly good and a curious sight. Enterprising community members capitalized on this, selling souvenirs with depictions of the shaggy baseballers. By the mid-1920s, crowds thinned just as the House of David began recruiting clean-shaven "ringers." Nevertheless, Price uses the community's story to demonstrate how baseball, with its universal language, helped members connect with a broader audience. Moreover, he implores American religious historians to pay greater attention to this understudied group.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine the mythic quality of baseball. Price first identifies similarities between baseball and the ancient Greek "omphalos myth," which tells of a cosmic mountain from where all sacred activity originates. Instead of a mountain, baseball's mythic center is the elevated pitcher's mound, where onlookers witness a cosmic struggle between the pitcher and batter, respectively symbolizing creation and destruction. Next, Price discusses how the game's culture of superstition thickens its mythic air. According to one legend, in 1945, bar owner Billy Sianis was forbidden from bringing his pet goat, Murphy, into Chicago's Wrigley Field. Infuriated, Sianis cursed the team, saying that no World Series would ever be played there again–and none has been. For fans, the curse is more than just a fanciful story. Rather, it is meaningful account that, according to Price, identifies "a cosmic cause for failure, thus absolving players from their ineptitude and fans from their lack of faith or dutiful support" (p. 108).

The next three chapters more forthrightly develop the book's central claim that baseball is an American civil religion. While mapping out the game's road toward becoming the "National Pastime," Price applies Ninian Smart's six dimensions of religion (experiential, myth-

ical, ritual, doctrinal, ethical, and social).[1] More than simple plug-and-chug scholarship, Price adeptly outlines the game's worldview-shaping appeal. For further evidence, Price uses baseball fiction. David James Duncan's 1992 novel, *The Brothers K*, follows a family with two recurring and indistinguishable conversations: baseball and religion. Price points to a key moment when the disabled father decides to play baseball to cope with hardship. What results is a renewed sense of hope and purpose, or as Price puts it, a "sacramental rejuvenation" (p. 177). Next, he references the fiction of W. P. Kinsella, author of *Shoeless Joe* (1982), which became the 1989 film *Field of Dreams*. Magic and mysticism characterize the story, as the main character, Ray, hears a spiritual voice whispering, "If you build it, he will come." Ray builds a baseball field at his small farm, where he eventually reunites with the specter of his estranged father. The story, according to Price, depicts a "realized eschatology," a final transformation that unfolds not in another world, but rather through one's own earthly efforts (p. 216).

In the final chapter on baseball "conversion narratives," Price recalls a youthful "pilgrimage" to Chicago to see his favorite team, the Yankees, play at Comiskey Park. To his delight, his beloved New Yorkers won a dramatic extra-inning game. "Maslow would call the event a peak experience, Tillich might call it *kairos*, but I simply thought of it as heaven" (p. 227). Still an unapologetic fan, Price is also a perceptive scholar who draws upon various disciplines to present an understanding of baseball's magnetic quality. *Rounding the Bases* has some minor flaws, to include the occasional overstatement. After applying Smart's theoretical framework, Price concludes, "baseball itself can be understood as a religion" (p. 169). The jarring "a religion" phrasing invites tiresome debates about what is, and is not, a religion.[2] A more nuanced wording (i.e., "religious experience") would help deflect such distractions. Price is at his best when he illustrates how the baseball diamond can become a location for spiritual transformation, ritual drama, communal bonding, and the like. These insights make even the most hardened baseball skeptic see why pews at the Church of Baseball are rarely empty.

Notes

[1]. Ninian Smart, *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs*, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000).

[2]. See Robert J. Higgs and Michael Braswell, *An Unholy Alliance: The Sacred and Modern Sports* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004). The authors denounce "sports apologists," citing Price in the index seventeen times.

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