

## *Faith and Sports: A Possible Encounter. The Subtle Line Between Competitive Passion and Spirituality*

(30 October 2024)

*Summary: This article explores the delicate balance between religious faith and sports, highlighting the controversial suspension of Serbian judoka Nemanja Majdov for making the sign of the cross before a match, thereby violating the neutrality rules of the International Judo Federation. It analyzes the importance of religious freedom within sports and the necessity to ensure an inclusive environment that respects the cultural and religious diversity of athletes. The article references precedents such as the adoption of the hijab in women's soccer, emphasizing the complexity of integrating spirituality into the competitive dimension without compromising athletes' individual identities. Finally, it calls for fostering constructive dialogue between different faiths and the sports world to ensure harmonious coexistence.*

*Keywords: faith, sports, religious gestures, neutrality, religious freedom, inclusivity, culture, identity, cultural tensions, intercultural dialogue, ritual, cooperation.*

In light of the upcoming Paris 2024 Olympics, an element of the situation surrounding the suspension faced by Serbian judo champion Nemanja Majdov has immediately caught the attention of the media<sup>1</sup>. Among the non-compliant behaviors that prompted the International Judo Federation (IJF) to impose this sanction was the gesture made by the athlete before the match when he made the sign of the cross. This behavior, the Federation concluded, was assimilable to those prohibited by Article 3 of the *Code of Ethics* (adopted in 2019), which prohibits any religious sign/gesture in the playing field<sup>2</sup>.

Due to the uproar caused by the affair, the Federation promptly denied in several statements that the suspension was solely related to the expression of a religious symbol/gesture on the field, emphasizing that the penalty was not only due to the gesture in question but also to other behaviors deemed appropriate to violate the *Code of Ethics*, as well as specific organizational/sporting regulations.

It is undeniable that the ethical rules adopted by the IJF tend to maintain a neutral and "uniform" playing environment and focus attention on the sporting event. Nonetheless, it seems legitimate to question the extent to which such an approach is capable of potentially severely limiting athletes' individual expressions of their cultural heritage and the values and beliefs they embrace.

<sup>1</sup> V. ad es., <https://nypost.com/2024/09/20/sports/serbia-olympics-judo-athlete-nemanja-majdov-banned-for-5-months-for-making-sign-of-cross-at-paris-games/>; <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/259417/judo-athlete-banned-for-five-months-sign-of-the-cross-at-olympics-one-of-several-factors>

<sup>2</sup> IJF, *Code of Ethics*, art. 3: "Do not show any object, sign or religious gesture or movement of any ostentatious form before, during or after the fight or during the formal ceremonies."

In this regard, it is pertinent to evoke a similar precedent that led to a different decision in another sport ten years ago, based on a broad and extended interpretation of the regulatory framework. Specifically, this refers to FIFA's resolution a decade ago—preceding the recent reform introduced by the *International Football Association Board (IFAB)*—which allowed Muslim female footballers to compete with their heads covered, even in official competitions, despite the regulatory stance prohibiting any religious garments or politically charged slogans. This was based on the argument that the *hijab* represented, first and foremost, a cultural symbol and then a religious one<sup>3</sup>. This argument supports the thesis that the religious aspect is intrinsically connected to the individual and cultural dimension of athletes.

It is evident that the use of religious gestures/symbols in sports, while manifesting identity claims protected by international and supranational law (as outlined in the fundamental charters of many countries<sup>4</sup>), can raise significant issues regarding the actual possibility of concurrently guaranteeing two essential instances: a) the specific protection of an athlete's right to express their religious beliefs, consistent with their individual identity; b) the perceived need of organizing or sponsoring bodies of sporting events to ensure a fundamental "neutrality" of the playing field.

The underlying facts indicate that religious freedom and sports are interconnected, with the goal of every public/private agency overseeing the sector being to promote a balance that guarantees every athlete's right to *practice* their faith while contributing to a more inclusive and respectful sporting environment in order to achieve harmonious coexistence between competition and freedom of worship within the global sports community.

Since the mid-1990s, the United Nations General Assembly has addressed the role of sports, adopting a series of resolutions linking sports and the Olympic ideal to the pursuit of peace<sup>5</sup>. This includes recommendations for observing the Olympic Truce among member states and support for human development initiatives through sports, with repeated calls for cooperation with the International Olympic Committee (IOC). The IOC itself states in its Olympic Charter that "*The practice of sport is a human right.*"

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<sup>3</sup> FIFA Regulations for Association Football, Rule No. 4, accompanied by Decision No. 1 from IFAB: "Players must not display undershirts that contain slogans or advertisements. Mandatory basic equipment must not contain any political, religious, or personal expressions. A player who lifts their shirt to display slogans or advertisements will be penalized by the competition organizers. The team of a player whose mandatory basic equipment contains political, religious, or personal writings or slogans will be sanctioned by the competition organizer or FIFA." The text of the regulation can be consulted at [www.aia-figc.it/download/regolamenti/reg\\_2011.pdf](http://www.aia-figc.it/download/regolamenti/reg_2011.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> On this point, more extensively, recently, CATERINA GAGLIARDI, *The Protection of Religious Identities in the Sports System. Legal Issues*, Luigi Pellegrini, Cosenza, 2023.

<sup>5</sup> See Resolution 49/29, available at "*Official Document System.*"

*Everyone should have the opportunity to practice sport, without discrimination of any kind and in the Olympic spirit.*<sup>6</sup>

The most critical point of the situation under discussion, as well as others like it, seems to be that sporting competitions have recently adopted an inclusivity and neutrality perspective aimed at promoting a substantial "standardized" uniformity of content and values. This has led to numerous revealing episodes of tensions that can arise when athletes' religious beliefs conflict with rules adopted to ensure this aseptic neutrality within the realm of sports. Such tensions risk, as seen in this case, resolving at the expense of the athlete's personal dimension, who fundamentally expresses a human right recognized by multiple significant legal sources, particularly international ones (beginning with Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights).

The gesture made by the champion indeed represents a part of his identity and personal journey. In this regard, it at least serves as a testimony to the statement made by the Serbian judoka, who promptly asserted that *"he will never renounce his Christian faith and that his gesture is a sign of gratitude to the Lord, who has given him everything in both his personal life and sporting career"*.<sup>7</sup> The imposition of certain prohibitions in a sporting context risks excluding athletes' human and spiritual dimensions.

Moreover, contributions to the reflection on this matter can be drawn from those studying the religious phenomenon from a particular scientific perspective. For example, insights can be gained from the writings of Olivier Baur, a professor at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Lausanne, in his personal blog *"Une théologie au quotidien,"* where he argues that religion and sports are similarly structured, both appropriating rituals, symbols, and gestures. It is also well known that Baron Pierre de Coubertin<sup>8</sup>, who was certainly not unfamiliar with Catholic culture (and was particularly interested in promoting the participation of members of Catholic sports societies in the Olympic games, finding support

<sup>6</sup> Olympic Charter, International Olympic Committee, 2011: [www.olympic.org/Documents/olympic\\_charter\\_en.pdf](http://www.olympic.org/Documents/olympic_charter_en.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2024/09/20/judo-nemanja-majdov-sospeso-segno-della-croce-cosa-e-successo/7700811/>

<sup>8</sup> On the contribution of the French Dominican friar Henri Martin Didon, particularly regarding what would become the motto of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) *"citius, altius, fortius,"* see A. ARVIN BERON, *"Et Didon, créa la devise des Jeux olympiques,"* Édition Sciriolus, Échirolles, 2003, passim, and ANGELA TEJA, *Padre Henri Martin Didon, una guida spirituale per il nascente olimpismo,* in *Pedagogia e vita*, n. 1, 2017, p. 51. It is noteworthy that a modification was recently introduced by the IOC during the session of July 20, 2021, specifically to emphasize the unifying power of sport and the importance of solidarity. As a result of this change, the English motto now reads: *"faster, higher, stronger - together"* (<https://olympics.com/ioc/olympic-motto>). For more on Didon, see HENRI DIDON, *Influences morales des sports athlétiques. Discours prononcé au Congrès Olympique du Havre le 29 juillet 1897* (in <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k73110q/f6.item.texteImage>).

with Pope Pius X<sup>9</sup>), envisioned creating—through Olympism—a kind of parallel religiosity, where the individual tests themselves in a hopefully peaceful context.

Regarding the Church's involvement and contribution, the Popes have explicitly demonstrated interest in sports practice on numerous occasions. Pope John Paul II in 2004 established the Church and Sport Section within the Pontifical Council for the Laity<sup>10</sup>, which has now—by Pope Francis's will—merged into the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life<sup>11-12</sup>. Notably, the words of his immediate successor, Benedict XVI, stand out, as he highlighted the potential of sporting practice by pointing out that competitions offer "the world a captivating spectacle of discipline and humanity, artistic beauty and relentless will," demonstrating *"the achievements to which the vitality of youth can lead when they do not shun the effort of hard training and willingly endure numerous sacrifices and deprivations,"* an ensemble of challenges and endeavors, falls and triumphs, which constitutes *"an important lesson in life."*

It is certainly interesting to also focus on another immediate similarity that stands out: sports and religion are both *"practiced,"* as it is said to *"practice sports"* just as one would *"practice religion."*

In the sporting context, cultural and religious diversity emerges forcefully and can influence athletes' participation and inclusion. Religious diversity, in particular, can manifest in various ways, such as respecting athletes' religious practices, rest days, dietary requirements, or even dress codes. Organizers of sporting events must take these needs into account to ensure all athletes can participate without compromise. Sensitivity toward different religious practices thus becomes a fundamental pivot for creating an inclusive environment, where every athlete can express their cultural identity.

Respect for religious differences is thus a tool for integration that promotes intercultural dialogue and fosters social cohesion, laying the groundwork for a universal language that transcends religious barriers. The interaction between sports and religion is rich and complex, offering multiple points for reflection on how these two aspects can enrich one another in the daily lives of individuals and entire communities. Sports, being

<sup>9</sup> It is finally reported by A. STELITANT *"Sport Enters the Vatican: The Relations of Pierre de Coubertin with Pius X and Merry del Val,"* in the Journal of Sports Law, 2, 2021 ([https://www.rivistadirittosportivo.it/Article/Archive/index\\_html?ida=205&idn=17&idi=-1&idu=-1](https://www.rivistadirittosportivo.it/Article/Archive/index_html?ida=205&idn=17&idi=-1&idu=-1)).

<sup>10</sup> The relevant documentation is still available at the address <https://www.laici.va/content/laici/it/sezioni/chiesa-e-sport.html>. Among the publications of the Council, see *"The World of Sport Today: A Field of Christian Commitment,"* Vatican Publishing House, Vatican City, 2005, as well as, from the same publisher, *"Sport: An Educational and Pastoral Challenge,"* 2018, and *"Sport, Education, Faith: For a New Season of the Catholic Sports Movement,"* 2011.

<sup>11</sup> (<https://www.laityfamilylife.va/content/laityfamilylife/it/sezione-laici/i-papi-e-lo-sport.html>).

<sup>12</sup> MARIA CRISTINA IVALDI, *Religious-inspired sports organizations: 'The case of the Italian Sports Center,' in State, Churches, and Confessional Pluralism.* online journal <https://www.statoechiese.it>, fascicolo 12, 2022.



an activity performed by humans and, therefore, part of their existence, inevitably bears the effects of belonging to a religious belief.

The fundamental hope is that the sports organization, in its autonomous and original being (as reaffirmed, for example, in a notable ruling by our Court of Cassation<sup>13</sup>), may fully recognize the factual basis that a primary component consists of athletes who, as human beings, carry a cultural background that includes the spiritual and religious aspect of their humanity.

In this regard, it is worth noting that in recent years there has been a growing acknowledgment of the importance of religious freedom in the sporting context, including measures to allow the use of religious symbols, and adjustments in programs and competitions to respect religious holidays.

However, there remains the difficulty of grappling with the anthropological-cultural data that indicates that in many cultures/experiences, sports are perceived almost as a form of ritual, compatible with the individual spirituality, which shapes athletes' faith as a source of inspiration and resilience. On the other hand, it also seems appropriate not to overextend in the opposite direction, adhering to views that push towards an excessive idealization of the athlete as a "messenger" of religious values, reducing the complexity of sports commitment to mere moral rhetoric.

The balance appears to be achievable rather through the realization that sports can contribute to building constructive dialogue between faiths and those public and entrepreneurial entities overseeing the sports field, commendably embracing universal ethical values of respect and inclusivity, overcoming tensions and seeking common ground. In an increasingly globalized and interconnected world, the need emerges to find a balance between adherence to regulations and the acceptance of identity/cultural diversities. Inevitably, tensions will continue to exist, but greater awareness and respect for different religious practices can undoubtedly foster a more inclusive and tolerant environment within a fairer and more supportive society, open to dialogue and welcome.

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<sup>13</sup> See Court of Cassation, United Sections, February 11, 1978, judgment no. 625, where it outlines the existence of "*an autonomous and original order, which derives its source from the international sports legal system and possesses administrative and regulatory powers.*"