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Benjamin J. Houlberg

*Fuller Theological Seminary*, [bhoulberg@fuller.edu](mailto:bhoulberg@fuller.edu)

Kenneth T. Wang

*Fuller Theological Seminary*, [ktwang@fuller.edu](mailto:ktwang@fuller.edu)

*See next page for additional authors*

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# Religiousness and Perceived God Perfectionism Among Elite Athletes

## Authors

Benjamin J. Houltberg, Kenneth T. Wang, and Sarah A. Schnitker

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Benjamin J. Houltberg, Ph.D.  
Kenneth T. Wang, Ph.D.  
Sarah A. Schnitker, Ph.D.  
Fuller Theological Seminary

### Abstract

Little research has been conducted examining the link between athletes' religious beliefs and practices and coping with the pressures related to elite competition. The purpose of the study was to investigate athletes' global self-worth and perfectionistic concerns as key variables that link religiousness and perceived God perfectionism to dealing with performance failure and appraisals of upcoming competition. Self-report data was collected from a sample of 99 elite athletes (Mdn age = 22, 48% female, 89% believed in God) that were currently competing at a NCAA D1, professional or Olympic level. We used structural equation modeling to test direct and indirect pathways of two separate theoretical models and bootstrapping for determining the significance of indirect effects. Self-worth and perfectionistic concerns were important in understanding the link between religious variables and outcomes in both models. Specifically, high levels of athlete religiousness were related to high levels of self-worth, which in turn was related to low levels of shame when recalling a disappointing performance. In contrast, perceived God perfectionism discrepancy (i.e. gap in perceived standards from God and the athletes' performance) was related to shame via a positive relation to perfectionistic concern. Religiousness was also directly related to feelings of comfort from God, whereas perceived God perfectionism was directly related to athletes' anger towards God after experiencing disappointment. For the second model, religiousness was linked to high levels of challenge appraisals and low levels of stress and threat appraisals of competition through high levels of global self-worth. On the other hand, perceived God perfectionism discrepancy was related to all three appraisals of competition through high perfectionistic concern and low self-worth. Overall, our findings suggest that religiousness can serve as an important resource for athletes or contribute to psychological difficulties. Implications of our findings for practitioners are discussed.

*Keywords: Religion, God Perfectionism, Self-Views, Elite Athlete, and Coping Strategies*

## Religiousness and Perceived God Perfectionism Among Elite Athletes

"All glory and thanks be to God" is not an unusual phrase by American athletes in post-victory interviews nor is a display of religious gestures (e.g. kneeling down to pray, pointing to the sky) during athletic competition. The visibility of religion in sports has sparked countless magazines articles, newspaper columns, books, and documentaries that have differing views on the utility of faith within sports. Recently, there has been increased scholarly attention on the interface of sports and Christianity due in part to organizations like Christian Society for Kinesiology, Leisure and Sport Studies (CSKLS) and the recent gathering of international researchers and professionals at the Inaugural Global Conference on Sports and Christianity (IGCSC). Scholars from a variety of fields, including theology and religious studies, philosophy and sociology (see Watson & Parker, 2014 for review) have provided comprehensive analysis and syntheses of the historical and contemporary integration of religion and sports. Moreover, theoretical and research informed arguments have been made for the importance of addressing spirituality of athletes in sport psychology (Egli, Fisher, & Gentner, 2014; Watson & Nesti, 2005). However, there is a dearth of research in the field of sport psychology examining the

impact of athletes' religious practices and experiences on their emotional health and athletic performance.

The little research published has yielded mixed results on whether religiousness serves as a resource for athletes dealing with the pressures of elite competition (see Burk et al., 2006; Rodek, Sekuliko, & Pasalic, 2008; Ridnour & Hammermeister, 2008). Clearly, there is a need for further empirical investigation in this area, especially because the link between religiousness and psychological well-being is well established in other sub-fields of psychology such as social and personality psychology (see Emmons, Barrett & Schnitker, 2008 for review) and developmental psychology (see King & Boyatzis, 2015 for review). In the current study, the researchers examined how religiousness and perceptions of God perfectionism related to dealing with a disappointing performance (e.g., shame, anger towards and comfort from God) and cognitive appraisals of an upcoming competition (e.g., threat, stress, challenge) among a sample of elite athletes (e.g., Olympic, professional, or NCAA Division1 level athletes).

### **The Promise of Religiousness: Promotion of Global Self Worth**

Religion and religiousness are multidimensional constructs, and there are on-going disagreements on the definitions of these terms within studies of religion and psychology (Oman, 2013). As solving these disagreements is beyond the scope of this paper, we adopted Koenig's definition of religion as a "system of beliefs and practices observed by a community, supported by rituals that acknowledge, worship, communicate with, or approach the Sacred, the Divine, God (in Western cultures, or Ultimate Truth, Reality, or nirvana in Eastern cultures" (p. 11). Thus, religiousness is operationalized as engagement in both public (e.g., service attendance) and private (e.g., personal prayer) religious activities in combination with personal, or intrinsic, religious commitment and motivation (Koenig & Büssing, 2010).

Some previous research demonstrated the protective nature of religiousness and spiritual well-being for athletes in terms of substance abuse, mental health, and athletic coping (Burke et al., 2006; Rodek, Sekuliko, & Pasalic, 2008; Ridnour & Hammermeister, 2008). However, there are also studies that identified aspects of religion that are harmful for athletes (Burke et al., 2006; Rodek et al; Sinden, 2013) such as less optimism, increased health issues, and denial of doping in sport. Further, research is needed for understanding ways that religiousness can either enhance emotional health or contribute to psychological difficulties in the world of elite sports.

One of the most promising mechanisms by which religiousness may lead to more positive health and well-being for elite athletes is a sense of global self-worth and value people may derive from religion. Religiousness is a distinctive and profound aspect of a person's life that can prominently shape her/his internalized narrative of self (Furrow, King & White, 2004; McAdams & Pals, 2006). Religions can provide a narrative script that people use to construct their life stories in ways that promote self-worth and help them deal with adversity. For example, McAdams (2001) found that participants who scored high on generativity at the end of life were more likely to have constructed narrative identities based on a redemptive arc that drew heavily on their participation in religious and civic organizations earlier in life (McAdams, 2001). Similarly, findings from the posttraumatic growth and adjustment literature showed that

people who attach religious meanings to stressful events are more likely to experience positive outcomes and growth after adversity (Laufer, Solomon, & Levine, 2010; Park, Edmondson, & Blank, 2009). Additionally, religiousness has been shown to predict higher levels of overall self-worth and lower levels of shame among adolescents and emerging adults (Barry & Nelson, 2008; Sanders, Allen, Fischer, Richards, Morgan, & Potts, 2015). Thus, a person's connection to God and her/his faith may create feelings of worthiness that strengthens in difficult times. This may be particularly important in the world of elite sports where athletes are under a tremendous amount of pressure to perform in order to maintain or earn scholarships, make national teams, and/or secure a sponsor.

Moreover, the ability of religiousness to promote self-worth and serve as a resource in adversity may be particularly important in elite sporting contexts given the unhealthy views of the self so prevalent in the sub-culture (Careless & Douglas, 2013; Koivula, Hassmén & Fallby, 2002). The world of elite sports is saturated with messages that athletes are only as valuable as their latest competition results, which can make it difficult for athletes to form a sense of self-worth apart from their performance in their respective sports. Even highly successful athletes may struggle in this environment where self-worth is so highly contingent upon performance as is expressed by the most decorated Olympian of all time: "I only saw myself as a swimmer. That's it. Nothing else. I had *no self-worth, no self-love*; I was just like, 'Yeah, I'm just a swimmer, I don't have anything else'" (Phelps, 2016).

Previous research has established the psychological disruptions that can occur when an athlete's sense of self-worth is constricted solely to the athletic domain (Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013). Further, a more global self-worth for athletes has been linked to greater psychological well-being and less negative coping strategies (Koivula et al., 2002; Masten, Tusak & Faganel, 2006; Martin, Fogarty, & Albion, 2014). Thus, religiousness may provide athletes a stable sense of self-worth that is derived from their religious faith in contrast to a volatile sense of worth that is based on the inevitable ups and downs of elite competition.

### **The Pitfall of Religion: Views of God as Perfectionistic**

Despite this potential promise of religion to provide a stable sense of self-worth to athletes, there are also potential pitfalls in the ways religiousness may function in elite sporting contexts. Some religious athletes may perceive that God's love or affection is somehow tied to performance. For example, one professional athlete posted on his social media, "God himself granted me the talent to be an amazing athlete, and I owe him every ounce of hard work, dedication, focus, passion and love that I have within me. I grind *because I don't want to fail him*" (anonymous, n.d.). This view of the self in relation to God may exacerbate the pressure for religious athletes to achieve perfect performance in order to prove their worth and stay in God's favor. In other words, they may come to view God as highly perfectionistic.

Perfectionism research has distinguished the maladaptive and adaptive aspects of perfectionism. Whereas maintaining perfectionistic strivings (i.e., setting excessively high standards) is sometimes useful in goals achievement contexts, adapting perfectionistic concern (i.e., placing unrealistic expectations on performance and becoming overly critical when

expectations are not met) is related to a variety of negative outcomes (see Stoeber, 2011 for review). Findings from Wang and colleagues (2017) suggest similar distinctions with beliefs about God's perfectionism. Perceptions of God as having high standards were distinct but related to high personal standards, whereas high levels of perceived God discrepancy (gap between God's standards and one's own performance) were linked to more maladaptive forms of personal perfectionism (and the consequent negative outcomes). Though not previously tested, it is logical to expect those elite athletes who perceive a high discrepancy between God's own high standards and their own performance will be more likely to experience perfectionistic concern and the subsequent negative outcomes.

### **How Views of God Affect Appraisals of Performance: Looking to the Past and Future**

Although religiousness and views of God's perfectionism are conceptualized as stable dispositions, the ways they are expressed and affect the emotional health outcomes of athletes may differ depending on the relevant situation of athletic training and competition context. Two types of psychological situations that are highly salient for appraisals of self-worth and perfectionism are dealing with disappointing performances and anticipating an upcoming competition.

#### **Dealing with disappointing performances.**

Dealing with disappointing or "failed" performances is a consistent requirement for athletes competing at elite levels. Some athletes are able to manage the negative emotions of such an experience in a way that is not internalized as a part of the personhood and are able to experience personal growth. Other athletes perceive the failure as reflecting their worth as a human being, and, in turn, experience high levels of shame and anger.

Shame is a self-conscious emotion that involves a feeling of being flawed as a result of perceived failure that has devastating emotional consequences (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Previous research has linked self-worth and perfectionistic concerns to shame (Stoeber, Kempe, & Keogh, 2008). Thus, athletes with an overall sense of self-worth and lower perfectionistic concerns may be less vulnerable to feelings of shame after a disappointing athletic performance (Sagar & Stoeber, 2009).

The ability to turn towards God (e.g., feelings of comfort) in moments of difficulty has also been linked to better psychological adjustment whereas negative emotions towards God (e.g., anger at God, feeling abandoned) or religious struggles can further perpetuate distress (Exline, 2013). Religious athletes that feel comforted by God in their disappointment may not only be able to bounce back from a failed experience but also experience spiritual and religious growth (Park, Edmondson, & Blank, 2009). The tendency to turn towards God in difficult times is likely dependent on a person's level of religiousness. For example, a general sense of connection to God on a daily basis (e.g. intrinsic religiousness) through engagement in organized (e.g. church attendance) and non-organized (e.g. prayer, reading scripture) religious activities have linked to more positive religious and spiritual coping in adversity (Koenig & Büssing, 2010). Therefore, athletes that have high levels of religiousness may also experience comfort from God in distressing moments at higher levels than their non-religious peers. On the other

hand, athletes who view God in a perfectionistic way (e.g. high discrepancy) may experience heightened psychological difficulties due to feeling angry towards God for perceived criticalness and abandonment.

**View of upcoming competition.** Most elite athletes experience the stress of performing in high-pressure situations. Cognitive appraisals within elite sport contexts have been shown to be important predictors of athletic performance (Cerin, Szabo, Hunt, & Williams, 2000). Peacock and Wong (1990) identified threat (i.e. the anticipation of future harms), challenge (i.e. the anticipation of future gains) and centrality (i.e. perceived importance of the event) as primary appraisals that impact how people deal with stress. Challenge appraisals have been linked to more pleasant emotions, positive coping skills, and overall performance satisfaction among athletes. In contrast, athletes that view competition as threatening and highly stressful also report higher levels of unpleasant emotions, maladaptive coping strategies, and dissatisfaction with performance (Nicholls, Polman, & Levy, 2012).

Both a sense of worth and perfectionistic concerns have been related to cognitive appraisals and stress coping. A global sense of self-worth may protect athletes from viewing competition as a threat (Brewer, Cornelius, Stephan, & Van Raalte, 2010; Brewer, Selby, Linder, & Petitpas, 1999) as opposed to athletes that have a fear of the social consequences of making a mistake (e.g., perfectionistic concern) that view competition as extremely stressful and as a threat to their social self (Crocker, Gaudreau, Mosewich, & Kljajic, 2014). This corresponds with the Social Self-Preservation Theory (SSPT) which suggests that social-evaluative threat contexts trigger physiological and emotional reactivity related heightened stress and fear (Dickerson, Gruenewald, & Kemeny, 2004). In other words, the stakes may be higher for athletes who derive human worth and value solely from athletic performance because they perceive upcoming competitions as threats to their value as human beings. On the other hand, athletes with a solid sense of self-value outside of sport may be more likely to view upcoming competitions as opportunities for growth.

### **Current Study**

Previous research has established the important role that religiousness and views of God play in helping people deal with stressful circumstances. The nature of elite competition is full of continuous stressful events and setbacks and although there has been a plethora of studies examining factors related to athletic performance, empirical studies that include measures of religion and/or spirituality are practically non-existent. Scholarly contributions outside of sport psychology have provided a solid foundation and rationale for why religion and spirituality are important to consider with athletes, but there is a desperate need for further research examining how religion contributes to both positive and negative ways of coping with disappointment and loss in sport as well as dealing with the pressure to perform. Further, there is a need for understanding factors that are internalized into an athlete's sense of self that is unique to the elite sporting context (Rees, Haslam, Coffee, & Lavalley, 2015).

The focus of this study is to address these gaps. We hypothesize in our first theoretical model that athlete religiousness and perceptions of God's perfectionism will be directly related

to athletes' attitudes towards God (both comfort from, anger towards) and feelings of shame after recalling a failed sporting performance. We also hypothesize that religiousness and God perfectionism will be indirectly related to shame through self-worth and perfectionistic concern. In our second model, we hypothesize that religiousness and God perfectionism will only be related to cognitive stress appraisals (challenge, stress, threat) of an upcoming competition through their relationship with self-worth and perfectionistic concerns.

## **Method**

### **Participant Characteristics**

Participants ( $N = 99$ ) were recruited from various athletic affiliations and collegiate sports teams across the United States (44.5% university athletes; 55.6% non-university athletes). Our sample was predominately Caucasian, young adult athletes (73% Caucasian; Median age = 22; 48% female with 37% reported being in the beginning or middle of their career. The majority (89%) of participants believed in God, with 62% identifying as Protestant, 17% did not belong to a particular religion, 13% were Catholic and 8% other. Further, roughly half of the athletes competed in "mostly" or "completely" individual sport (53%; e.g. Track & Field, Swimming, Cycling, Speed Skating) whereas the remainder competed in "mostly" or "completely" team sports (e.g. baseball, rugby, soccer). Among the athletes in our sample, 74% reporting being a National Collegiate Athletic Association Division 1 (NCAA D1) athlete at some point with 45% of the athletes reported being in the NCAA championships of their respective sport. Further, athletes reported competing internationally (38%) including in the World Championships (22%). There were 16 athletes that competed in the Olympic Trials with seven athletes making the Olympic Team and five athletes had won Olympic or World Championship medals. Finally, 18% of our sample reported being a professional athlete.

### **Recruitment**

Participants for our study were recruited directly and through non-religious sporting organizations (e.g. elite clubs, national teams), coaches and Universities. Snowball sampling was also used to increase our sample size. Only athletes that were currently competing and were over the age of 18 were recruited. Collegiate athletes must have been competing at a NCAA Division 1 level and non-collegiate athletes were identified as competing at an elite level.

### **Procedure**

Approval for all research activities was ascertained from our Institutional Review Board and informed consent was obtained before participation in the study. Athletes completed questionnaire measures through Qualtrics links sent through E-mail and/or social media. Participants completed the questionnaire on average of about 30 minutes and were compensated with either \$10 or given the opportunity to donate the \$10 to one of several offered charity organizations. NCAA student-athletes were informed that they would only have the option to donate their compensation for participation to a charity due to NCAA regulations against non-NCAA member institutions compensating NCAA student-athletes for research participation.

### **Measures**



**Religiousness Latent Factor.** The Duke University Religion Index (DUREL; Koenig & Bussing, 2010) is a five-item measure of religious involvement that includes dimensions of religiousness. Organizational religious activity (ORA; “How often do you attend church or other religious meetings?”) and non-organizational religious activity (NORA; “How often do you spend time in private religious activities, such as prayer, meditation or Bible?”) are both rated on a 6-point scale. For ORA the response choice ranged from 1 (*Never*) to 6 (*More than once/week*) while NORA ranged from 1 (*Rarely or never*) to 6 (*More than once a day*). Intrinsic religiousness is measured based on a computed mean score of three items (e.g. “In my life, I experience the presence of the Divine”) and the response choices range from 1 (*definitely not true*) to 5 (*definitely true of me*). The Cronbach’s alpha in the current study of intrinsic religiousness was .90. All three measures were included for a latent score of religiousness.

**Perception of Perfectionism from God.** The Perceived Perfectionism from God Scale (PPGS; Wang, Allen, Stokes, & Suh, 2017) was developed based on the Almost Perfect Scale-Revised (APS-R). Ratings are made on a 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*) scale. It consists of two core perfectionism dimensions (Standards, 6-items & Discrepancy, 9-items). Standards are the adaptive aspect with items like “God expects the best from me”, whereas discrepancy (the gap between their standards and performance) is the negative aspect and includes items such as “My performance rarely measures up to God's standards”. The Cronbach’s alpha in the current study was .81 for standards and .80 for discrepancy.

**Perfectionistic Striving and Concern.** The Sport Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (SMPS-2; Dunn et al., 2006) was used to measure unique perfectionistic traits related to sports. The SMPS-2 consists of six subscales, but only concern over mistakes (8 items) was used for the current study. Sample items include: “If I fail in competition, I feel like a failure as a person.” Items on this scale are rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The Cronbach’s alpha in the current study was .83 for concern over mistakes.

**Global self-worth.** The 10-item subscale of positive esteem of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1979) was utilized to measure overall positive self-concept. All items are scored on a four-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Sample items include: “I feel that I have a number of good qualities” (positive esteem) and “At times I think I’m no good at all” (reversed scored). Cronbach’s alpha in the current study was .88.

**Shame after disappointing event.** Participants were directed to remember a time that they were disappointed in an athletic performance and asked “on a scale between 0 (*not at all*) - 100 (*extremely*), how devastating was this event for you?” Athletes then completed the subscale of shame (5-items) from the State Shame and Guilt Scale (SSGS; Marschall, Sanftner, & Tangney, 1994). Items are measured with a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not feeling this way at all*) to 5 (*feeling this way very strongly*) and a sample item is “I feel humiliated, disgraced.” Cronbach’s alpha for this study was .89.

**Attitudes toward God after disappointing event.** Participants also completed The Attitudes Towards God –9 Scale to assess feelings of anger toward God and feelings of comfort

associated with God (Wood et al., 2010) in relation to their disappointing event. Participants rated the extent they agreed with statements such as “trust God to protect and care for you” (comfort) and “feel that God has let you down” (anger) on a scale ranging from 1 (*Not at all*) to 10 (*Extremely*). Cronbach’s alphas for this study were .96 and .86 for comfort and anger, respectively.

**Stress appraisals of upcoming competition.** Participants were asked to think of their next important athletic competition and rate “on a scale between 0 (*not at all*) - 100 (*extremely*), how important is this event for you?” Participants then completed the threat, stress and challenge appraisal subscales (4-items each) of the 28-item Stress Appraisal Measure (SAM; Peacock & Wong, 1990) that assesses their current views of the particular forthcoming sport competition. Participants rated questions such “Is this going to have a negative impact on me?” (threat), “To what extent do I perceive this competition as stressful?” (stress) and “To what extent can I become a stronger person because of this competition?” (challenge) on a 5-point Likert-type scale of 1 (*Not at all*) to 5 (*Extremely*) on. Cronbach’s alphas of this current study were .68 for threat, .80 for stress and .83 for challenge.

### **Analytical Strategy**

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations for the study variables are first conducted (see Table 1). Next, structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted using *Mplus 7.3* (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2012) to test two separate theoretical models with different outcomes (upcoming competition appraisals and disappointing performance emotions). Both models included a latent factor for religiousness with three indicators (nonorganized, organized, intrinsic religiousness), two observed variables of God perfectionism (standard, discrepancy) as well as observed variables of global self-worth and perfectionistic concern. The two models differed based on their outcome variables. Specifically in the first model, we examined hypothesized model with all possible direct and indirect (via perfectionistic concern and self-worth) pathways between religiousness variables and emotions (e.g. towards God and self) experienced after a disappointing performance. The second model investigated hypothesized direct and indirect pathways between religiousness variables and views towards an upcoming competition (threat, stress and challenge appraisals). A full information maximum likelihood (FIML) for parameter estimation was employed and non-significant pathways were trimmed and model fit indices were examined to achieve a more parsimonious model, (Kline, 2011; CFI > .95, RMSEA < .06, SRMR < .08 for good fit; Marsh, Hau, & Wen, 2004). Indirect effects were estimated, and bootstrapping was used to estimate the standard errors and 95% biased-corrected confidence intervals of pathway coefficients (MacKinnon, Lockwood, & Williams 2004). Finally, the number of years of the athlete has been in competition was entered as a covariate in the final model to examine potential changes in the overall findings.

## **Results**

### **Testing Direct and Indirect Effects**

The factor loadings of the religiousness indicators in the measurement model were all above .70 demonstrating a strong latent construct. Second, both structural models were examined

and non-significant links were trimmed to improve model fit and maintain model parsimony (Kline, 2011). Both final models (Figure 1 and 2) fit the data well:  $\chi^2 (27) = 38.52, p = .07$ ; CFI = .96; RMSEA = .07; SRMR = .07, and  $\chi^2 (23) = 28.01, p = .22$ ; CFI = .98; RMSEA = .05; SRMR = .05.

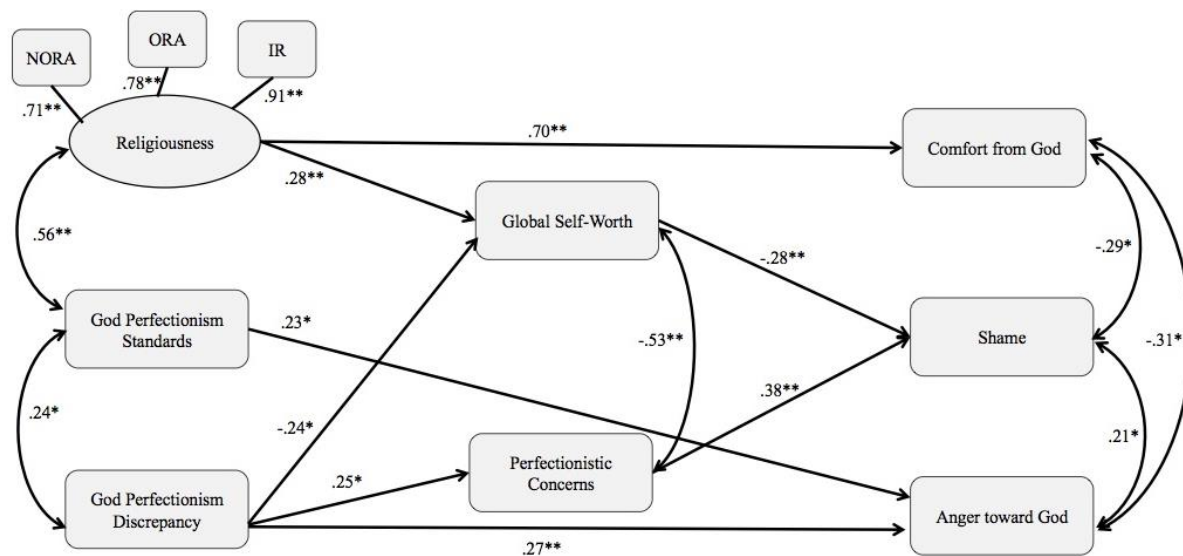


Figure 1. The effects of religiousness and perceived God perfectionism on athlete attitudes toward God and shame post-disappointing performance.  
Note: \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$

**Disappointing performance final model results.** As indicated in Figure 1, the level of religiousness and perfectionistic views of God (discrepancy and standards) were directly related to an athlete's attitude towards God after experiencing a disappointing performance in different ways. Specifically, religiousness was significantly related to perceived feelings of comfort from God whereas high levels of both standards and discrepancy were related to higher levels of anger towards God after post-disappointing performance. Religiousness and discrepancy were also indirectly related to shame via self-worth,  $ab = -.35, p < .05$ , 95% CI  $[-.81, -.06]$ , and  $.06, p < .05$ , 95% CI  $[-.01, .16]$  respectively, and only discrepancy was indirectly linked to shame through an association with perfectionistic concerns,  $ab = .09, p < .05$ , 95% CI  $[-.02, .18]$ . In other words, higher levels of religiousness was related to higher levels of self-worth, which, in turn, was related to lower levels of post-disappointment shame. On the other hand, higher perceived discrepancy from God was related to lower levels of self-worth and higher levels of perfectionistic concerns, which were both significantly related to shame. Perceived God standards were not related to self-worth, perfectionistic concern or shame.

**Appraisals of competition final model results.** As for the second model, only religiousness and discrepancy were indirectly related to appraisals of upcoming competition but in different ways (see Figure 2). Higher levels of reported religiousness was related to higher levels of self-worth and self-worth was positively related to viewing an upcoming competition as a challenge,  $ab = .22, p < .05$ , 95% CI  $[-.02, .54]$  and negatively related to both threat,  $ab = -.19, p < .05$ , 95% CI  $[-.42, -.02]$ , and stress,  $ab = -.23, p < .05$ , 95% CI  $[-.53, -.05]$  appraisals. Perceived God discrepancy was also linked to challenge appraisals via self-worth but through a negative

relation with self-worth,  $ab = -.04$ ,  $p < .05$ , 95% CI  $[-.10, -.01]$ . God perfectionism discrepancy was indirectly related to both threat and stress appraisals of upcoming competitions. Higher levels of perceived discrepancy was related to lower levels of self-worth and self-worth was negatively related to both threat appraisals,  $ab = .03$ ,  $p < .05$ , 95% CI  $[-.01, .09]$ , and stress appraisals,  $ab = .04$ ,  $p < .05$ , 95% CI  $[-.01, .11]$ . Meanwhile, discrepancy was linked to threat and stress appraisals through a positive relation to perfectionistic concerns,  $ab = .04$ ,  $p < .05$ , 95% CI  $[-.01, .09]$ , and  $.04$ ,  $p < .05$ , 95% CI  $[-.01, .10]$  respectively.

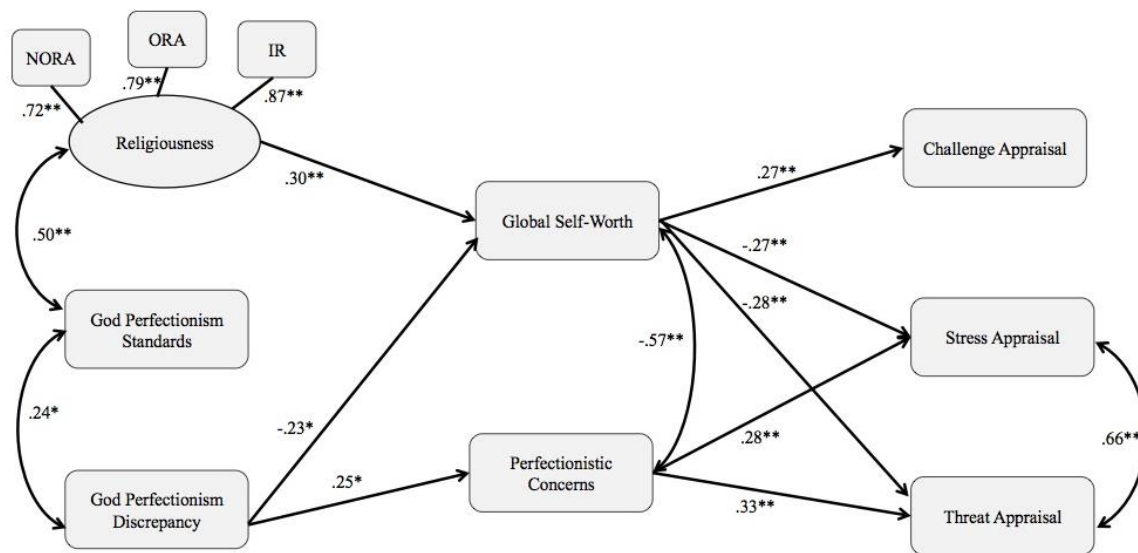


Figure 2. The effects of religiosity and perceived God perfectionism on athlete cognitive appraisals of upcoming competition.  
Note:  $^{**}p < .01$ ,  $^*p < .05$

In sum, global self-worth and perfectionistic concerns were key underlying mechanisms for the relationships between both athletes' religiosity and perceived discrepancy from God and post-disappointment shame and appraisals of upcoming competition. Religiosity related to higher levels of self-worth in both models and self-worth was related to lower levels of shame in model 1 and lower levels of threat and stress appraisals in model 2. Further, athlete religiosity was significantly related to perceptions of competition as a challenge through a positive relationship with global self-worth. Finally, religiosity was directly related to feelings of comfort from God after a disappointing performance, whereas perceived standards and discrepancy from God was related to higher levels of anger towards God after experiencing disappointment. Overall patterns of findings remained the same (e.g. model fit indices, path coefficients) when years of competition was entered as a covariate and due to power no further analyses was conducted.

## Discussion

There are only a handful of studies within sport psychology that examine the role of religion/spirituality, which is in stark contrast to the extensive amount of research outside of sports that has linked religion/spirituality to peoples' ability to cope with stress (Emmons et al., 2008; King & Boyatzis, 2015; Laufer et al., 2010). The current findings demonstrate the critical

resource that religion can be for athletes as they navigate the challenges and stressors of competing at a high level. We found that religiousness can promote a sense of self-worth that protect elite athletes from experiencing high levels of post-performance shame and help athletes appraise competition as a challenge, as opposed to as a threat or stressful. Athlete reports of religiousness were also positively related to feeling comfort from God after a disappointing sporting performance. It may be that religiousness creates opportunities for attaching religious meaning to performance failure (Park, Edmondson, & Blank, 2009) that affords athletes a sense of comfort knowing there is a greater purpose or lesson to be found in the experience. This is consistent with previous research that found athletes' spiritual well-being was related to athletic coping skills (Ridnour & Hammermeister, 2008).

The protective nature of religiousness may depend in part on the impact it has on an athlete's internalized narrative about self-worth (Furrow, King & White, 2004; McAdams & Pals, 2006). In our majority Christian sample, religiousness was predominately related to our outcomes through its relationship to self-worth. The Christian message of God's unconditional love may be particularly important for athletes as they live in a heightened performance-based context where everything is earned (Null, 2008). Athletes that are regularly engaged in religious practices and communities may be more likely to internalize messages about their worth based on their religious faith and beliefs rather than on their athletic performances.

The current findings suggest that religiousness may provide a sense of self-worth independent of sporting performance that can help athletes endure disappointment and view competition as an opportunity to bring out their best. Previous research has found that a sense of self-worth not restricted to the athletic domain helps athletes cope with adversity and manage performance anxiety (Careless & Douglas, 2013; Koivula, et al., 2002). Likewise, athletes in our study with a strong sense of self-worth reported lower levels of post-performance shame and viewed competition as less stressful and threatening. In accordance with SSPT (Dickerson et al., 2004), athletes may not perceive competition as a social evaluative threat when they recognize their human value outside of just athletic performance. This may help athletes view competition as an opportunity for growth because their human worth is not at stake every time they perform. Consequently, a failed performance can be disappointing and painful but it is not internalized as being a reflection of their value as a human being.

However, the current study also points toward emotional and spiritual struggles that can occur when athletes feel unable to perform in a way that meets unrealistic expectations from God. This discrepancy was directly related to athletes feeling anger towards God when recalling a disappointing sporting performance. Further, viewing God as perfectionistic may lead to feelings of shame when an athlete doesn't perform well and increase the level of threat and stress appraisals of competition by undermining an athlete's sense of self-worth and fostering a personal perfectionistic concern. This adds further empirical support for the negative consequences of viewing God as setting unrealistic standards (Wang et al., 2017) and identifies the importance of examining perfectionistic views of God among elite athletes or possibly in other high achieving contexts.

Thus, it is important that researchers examine athletes' views of God alongside general variables of religiousness, as there were distinct differences in how they related to outcomes in our study. This highlights the need for continued scholarly attention to the interface of practical theology and sport as athletes may be internalizing competing messages about their human value within their own religious traditions (Sinden, 2013). For example, some sports ministries are influenced by a "muscular Christianity" view of successful performance that provides a pedestal for evangelism (Null, 2008; Watson & Parker, 2014). This may unknowingly reinforce a view of God as being perfectionistic and lead to more performance-based self-worth or perfectionistic concern in order to be effective for God. This may not only place additional pressure on athletes but also undermine the potential resource that religiousness can provide. It may be difficult for elite athletes to stay engaged with their religious faith if they continually feel they have failed God when they do not perform well in sport. Additionally, the researchers found this view of God fosters anger and feelings of abandonment in adverse times (e.g. disappointing performance) that would likely further distance athletes from their religious faith.

There were some other non-significant or surprise findings that are important to note. Religiousness was not significantly related to perfectionistic concern, in the negative direction, or directly related to any other more maladaptive variable in our study (e.g. threat appraisal, shame, anger towards God). Religiousness alone may not be enough to counter athletes' perfectionistic concerns, feelings of shame or threat/stress appraisals of competition due to the amplified focus on performance in the world of elite sport. This reinforces the need for research to examine other variables for potential ways that religion impacts the psychological well-being of elite athletes. In our study, religiousness and views of God were mainly related to our outcomes via self-worth and perfectionistic concern.

Although previous research has found perceived God standards as adaptive (Wang et al., 2017), we found it linked to anger towards God after recalling a failed performance. Competing at an elite level requires a tremendous amount of dedication and work that does not always translate to optimal performance. This may make it more difficult for athletes to reconcile a "failed" performance with God's high standards leaving them feeling angry and abandoned. However, it is important to note that perceived God standards were not linked to any other maladaptive outcomes in our study which distinguishes it from its maladaptive counterpart (discrepancy) and suggest that God standards alone may not be detrimental to the psychological well-being of athletes (Wang et al., 2017).

The cross-sectional and self-report design of this study limit the ability to determine causality and directionality of our final models. Further longitudinal studies with multiple methods of measurement are warranted to expand our understanding of the impact of religion/spirituality on how athletes cope with disappointment and deal with pressures to perform. Additionally, our sample was predominately Christian and Caucasian athletes from North America, which limits generalizability. Future studies are needed with diverse samples and larger sample sizes to explore possible group differences.

### Implications for Practitioners

Although these limitations provide caution for interpretation, our results lend credence to the importance of attending to the religious and spiritual needs of elite athletes as a part of their mental preparation for dealing with the pressures of elite performance (Egli et al., 2014; Watson & Nesti, 2004). This may require further training for practitioners to be culturally competent in ways that religiosity/spirituality can be helpful and hurtful for dealing with disappointment and pressure. Our findings point the attention of practitioners to how religious views and practices shape athletes' self-worth and perfectionistic concerns. Because religion can be such an important part of an athlete's sense of identity (Furrow et al., 2004), practitioners may strengthen rapport and increase understanding of their client by engaging athletes in conversations about the religious faith. Finally, asking about religious beliefs and practices could be included as a part of the overall assessment and inquiry of background information of athletes. The current findings suggest that practitioners would overlook a critical resource and potential pitfall for athletes if they neglect addressing an athlete's religiousness and views of God around performance.

Consultants of sport psychology or practitioners may also partner with chaplains to ensure that an athlete's religiousness is fostered and strengthened in a way that promotes healthy coping strategies and personal growth. However, chaplains may also benefit from training that increases awareness of performance-based religious narratives that athletes may internalize as their self-narrative. Further, Waller (2016) argues for training to include healthy identity formation among the chaplains themselves as working with elite athletes can present unique challenges. Null (2008) discusses the priority of chaplains in challenging the view that athletes have to prove their self-worth as it runs counter to the Christian gospel. He distinguishes between "ministering to" athletes that reminds Christian athletes of human worth based on what Jesus did for them at the cross and "ministering through" athletes that focuses on helping athletes evangelize.

"If their athletes have not yet learned to break free of a sporting mentality where one's value is determined by performance, they will be prone to thinking that the most important means of winning God's approval is winning others to Him" (Null 2008, p. 253).

Findings from this study highlight the emotional and spiritual disruption that can occur as a result of such a perfectionistic view of God and support the importance of athletes finding a sense of self-worth from their religious beliefs and practices.

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**Table 1**  
*Intercorrelations Between Study Variables*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. NORA													
2. ORA	.58***												
3. IR	.70***	.61***											
4. GPS	.36**	.33**	.49***										
5. GPD	-.16	-.19	-.09	.24*									
6. RSES	.26*	.34**	.31**	.17	-.27**								
7. PERF	-.07	-.05	-.16	.04	.25*	-.59***							
8. COM	.43***	.36**	.61***	.46***	-.09	.28**	-.23*						
9. Shame	.00	.04	-.03	-.04	.01	-.50***	.59***	-.24*					
10. Anger	.10	.15	.01	.27**	.30**	-.07	.29**	-.11	.23*				
11. CA	-.02	.12	.07	.04	-.11	.27**	-.20*	.07	-.08	.01			
12. SA	-.11	-.03	-.08	-.10	.14	-.44***	.43***	-.24*	.49***	.12	.01		
13. TA	-.31	-.16	-.34**	-.14	.11	-.47***	.49***	-.25*	.48***	.08	-.14	.74***	
<b>Mean</b>	<b>3.89</b>	<b>3.71</b>	<b>4.95</b>	<b>25.16</b>	<b>13.39</b>	<b>31.01</b>	<b>24.10</b>	<b>35.86</b>	<b>13.30</b>	<b>9.13</b>	<b>14.89</b>	<b>10.30</b>	<b>8.22</b>
<b>SD</b>	<b>1.50</b>	<b>1.73</b>	<b>1.10</b>	<b>6.61</b>	<b>5.85</b>	<b>4.99</b>	<b>6.19</b>	<b>15.53</b>	<b>5.71</b>	<b>7.05</b>	<b>3.44</b>	<b>3.54</b>	<b>2.87</b>

*Note.*  $N = 99$ . NORA = Non-organizational religious activity; ORA = Organizational religious activity; IR = Intrinsic Religiousness; GPS = God perfectionism standards; GPD = God perfectionism discrepancy; RSES = Global self-worth; PERF = Perfectionism Concern; COM = Feelings of comfort from God; Shame = Post performance shame; Anger = Feelings of Anger towards God; CA = Challenge appraisal of upcoming competition; SA = Stress appraisal of upcoming competition; TA = Threat appraisal of upcoming competition.

$p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ , two-tailed.