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Just How Much Is Sports Fandom Like Religion?

By Michael Serazio

Pro sports teams are like what religion and sociology scholars call "totems"—symbols of greater entities that communities gather around for identity and unity.



Two San Diego fans perform the sacred ceremonial Chargers face-painting ritual before a game in 2011. (AP / Denis Poroy)

The Super Bowl, professional sports' highest holy day, is again upon us. As fans paint their faces and torsos, pile on licensed apparel, and quixotically arrange beer cans in the shape of team logos, the question must, again, be asked: Why exactly do we do this for our teams?

Why, in my own case, do I feel the need to sport a Chargers cap on fall Sundays sitting in front of the television when decades of futility, not to mention common sense, suggests it has little effect on outcome?

The answer—and the secret of fandom—might just be found in a context far removed from professional football.

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Almost precisely a century ago, Emile Durkheim pondered along similar lines. Durkheim, a pioneering sociologist, began digging through accounts of "primitive" cultures like the Arunta tribe of Australia, hoping to excavate the ancient source of ties that bind. His conclusion—as revealed in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*—remains as profound and relevant today as it is elegantly simple: Whenever a society (or, here, sports subculture) worships a divine form, it is, in fact, also simultaneously worshipping itself.

For Durkheim, this all hinged on what he called "the totem." As he wrote, "On the one hand, [the totem] is the external and tangible form of what we have called the... god. But on the other, it is the symbol of that particular society we call the clan. It is its flag; it is the sign by which each clan distinguishes itself from others, the visible mark of its personality."

In other words, our religious totems, while "officially" symbolizing deities, also implicitly offer vessels for fellowship; licenses to congregate together. As social creatures, there is something universal—and still enduring—in that tribal yearning. Yet community is often more abstract and imagined than concrete and identifiable.

The totem, then, gives believers a physical representation of that need for identity and unity: a Star of David hung from the neck; a Ganesh figurine placed on the dashboard; a St. Christopher medal tucked in the wallet. Theological justifications are really just incidental; what matters is that through our faith in these common artifacts, community is forged.

Alas, formal, organized religion in America today seems but a shell of its former self. A recent Pew study noted that the percentage of the U.S. public declaring themselves religiously "unaffiliated" had grown to one-fifth, including one-third of those under 30—the highest figures in the poll's history. Faith in other institutions—family, one's employer, political entities—is equally dwindling, though such institutions once also rooted the individual in something larger.

What totems, therefore, still survive in this culture of ours? The Red Sox. The Packers. The Lakers. And so on. The notion that sports remain our civic religion is truer than we often let on: In fandom, as in religious worship, our social connections are brought to life, in the stands as in the pews. It serves as a reminder of our interconnectedness and dependency; it materially indexes belonging. Like others, I indulge the royal "we" when speaking of my team, though there is little evidence they need me much beyond ticket sales, merchandise, and advertising impressions. Nonetheless, as Durkheim long ago noticed, "Members of each clan try to give themselves the external appearance of their totem ... When the totem is a bird, the individuals wear feathers on their heads." Ravens fans surely understand this.

In short, if you look hard at sports, you can't help but see contours of religion.

Others have gestured to these parallels over the years. Some have highlighted how both preserve revered spaces (e.g., Sistine Chapel, Wrigley Field) and observe seasonal rhythms and orderly ceremonial frameworks. Elsewhere, it has been claimed that with its religious metaphors, regular

invocations of good and evil, and sacred vestments (The Shroud of Schilling!), sports channel a natural religious impulse—driving one, somehow, "Godward."

Writing about British soccer fans, one sociologist observed that: "Just as Durkheim suggested aboriginal tribes worship their society through the totem, so do the lads reaffirm their relations with other lads through the love of the team."

The sports totem therefore gives me reason to strike up a conversation with a stranger; better still, it offers phone fodder for calls to Grandpa. We routinely speak of being "born" into a particular fandom and treat those who change allegiances to rival teams with the same alienation familiar to heretics and apostates.

And should the Chargers ever reward my faith with a Super Bowl win—and, having lived through the Ryan Leaf years, I'm not holding my breath here—I'll finally have recourse to revel riotously, just as we'll see for one lucky, exhilarated fan base in a few days' time.

Durkheim had a name for this, too. He called it "collective effervescence," that social "electricity" that gets generated when groups gather to exalt in epic rituals. In that, the post-game celebration and day-after parades, with its feverish outpouring of emotion—all that hugging and high-fiving, those deafening howls and blubbery weeping—might look like chaotic disorder but it is actually a rare moment of social *order*: a glimpse of spontaneous solidarity, an interlude of uninhibited integration. This is not to excuse the excess of vandalism or violence that often accompanies the effervescence; the same social norms that maintain chilly anonymity in day-to-day modern life also serve to uphold law and decorum.

Yet that anonymity can inevitably be an unsettling thing; just ask anyone who's ever moved far from home. It doesn't really matter whether our teams win or lose on the field. As long as the totem survives, so do we. Turns out, that's what I'm really rooting for and why I'm still wearing that Chargers cap every Sunday afternoon.

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