

'Football Violence'

The similarity between religious devotees and football fans has long been noted, and sociologists have written learned articles on the subject. Football is for many people the be all and end all; it means everything to them. They live for their team, and when they die, they have on their coffin not a cross but a symbol of their beloved sport. The former Scottish footballer and manager of Liverpool, Bill Shankly, once made a striking comment:

“Some people think that football is a matter of life and death. I don't like that attitude. I can assure them that it is much more than that!”

Most of us have watched a crowd on television singing the National Anthem before the start of an England game – many with their hands raised to the heavens, some even with their eyes closed, singing their hearts out and perhaps even praying for God to grant them victory. One commentator observed after watching this, “It looks for all the world like worship in a Pentecostal super-church.”

But if football is a quasi-religion, how does that affect our view of the violence which marred the opening of the recent European Football Championship in France? The proceedings had scarcely begun when there were disturbances in Lille and thousands of riot police were deployed with tear gas and batons. 16 people were taken to hospital during the course of the violence, dozens were arrested, and Uefa, the ruling football body, felt obliged to issue Russia with a warning that if there was a repeat of the trouble seen at the Stade Vélodrome, they would be disqualified from the competition.

Following the Orlando gay club massacre perpetrated by an Islamic extremist, the Republican presidential candidate, Donald Trump, made remarks which implied that all Muslims are potentially dangerous. But I wonder if he would wish, in the light of the football hooliganism in France, to say the same about fans of football – to class them as similarly dangerous? A case could certainly be made for saying that football can breed antisocial behaviour on and off the field. A few years ago the Scouts in the Bromley area banned all football matches between the different Cub packs because of unacceptable behaviour by supporters (mainly parents) on the touchline. We could perhaps, with evidence like this, look upon football as inherently violent, but most of us, I suspect, would prefer to say that the game has simply been a vehicle used by certain people who *already* have violence in their hearts.

Perhaps a similar response is called for when a religion like Islam (or Christianity) is accused of causing violence? Its institutions, beliefs and practices may not be perfect and they may well be in urgent need of radical reform and renewal. But is it entirely to blame for the behaviour of violent religious extremists, or has it been used at least in part like the game of football, as a vehicle for violence by certain people who already have violence in their hearts? I would suggest the latter.

The problem of sin and evil is a problem of fallen humanity in general, not of religion in particular. Evil will not disappear if we ban religion. The primary problem which Jesus came to resolve was the problem of the human heart (Mk.7:20-23). He was the second Adam (1 Cor.15:45), the start of a renewed humanity.