



“A Church without Walls”: The Raider Nation as a Postmodern Form of Religious Community Formation

This project focuses on the community of fans dedicated to the NFL’s Oakland Raiders. This imagined community—The Raider Nation—will be theorized and approached as a type of congregation. By drawing on and applying the methods and insights provided by scholars studying congregations as well as visual, material and practice and ritual cultures of religion and religious practitioners, this project will focus on the material, visual and ritual/practice elements of fan behavior and fan culture to describe, detail and locate the sports fan base as a specific type of community: a congregation.

The Oakland Raiders are among the most prominent NFL franchises. In many ways, they are in fact *the* iconic franchise. Moreover, the Raider Nation is among the most notorious fan groups in the world, and has recently been the subject of a documentary of the same name. The Nation makes its presence most clearly felt in sections 104, 105, 106 and 107 at the Oakland Alameda-County Coliseum during home games—the infamous “Black Hole.” That is, that’s where they are when they’re not travelling en masse to places like San Diego, home of the Raiders’ annual “unofficial ninth home game” or anywhere else the Raiders happen to be playing. No fan group travels in greater numbers than does the Nation, and no group of fans is more widely reviled, feared and respected than is the Raider Nation.

Although the analogies between religion and sport are widely known, particularly with regard to spectatorship and passive consumption, studies of fans and fan culture are relatively recent developments. This project will build upon and augment these studies by constructing a framework from which to

approach the fan base—the congregation. Recent work both in the study of sport and of religion has showcased the utility of the idea of the “career paths” of each set of participants. Utilizing this basic approach allows for an exploration of the fan community developmentally, in terms of the progression of the participant along the career path, as well as providing a coherent basis for linking various approaches to the study of contemporary religion and sport, including economic, psychological, visual and material cultural and practice-based models. These approaches will be used to show the ways in which the participants, far from being passive consumers or even simply active participants in the spectacle, are vital agents in the creation, legitimation and sacralization of the rites, symbols and locations/spaces of the event. Thus, one of the themes of this project is the dissolution, diffusion and reformation of location-bound religious praxis on contemporary American society. Focusing on the performances consumed by the fans, the locations in which these performances are consumed, and the features of this diffuse, mediated consumption—ritual, pilgrimage, communal meals, symbols, corporeality—will permit a thorough exploration of the means by which voluntary consumption-based communities are made and bound together.



l: Al Davis



r: Ice Cube



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