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Russell, K. A.

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## **The Muslim Sports Tourist and the Olympic Games Movement**

**Karl A. Russell and Noëlle O'Connor**

### **Abstract**

This paper explores the view that the Olympic Games Movement and the modern day Olympic Games while seeking to be a secular event is regarded by many participants and spectators as an event where they are able to demonstrate expressions of their religious faith. The first Olympic Games were staged in ancient Greece and they comprised a series of sporting events staged as a way of honouring the Greek God; Zeus, considered by the Romans to be a pagan god. The origins and mythology surrounding the early Olympic Games had a non-secular basis and led to an almost intrinsic belief that to attend the Olympic Games was a way of undertake a sporting pilgrimage to affirm one's faith and to give praise to one's God. The aim of this paper is to examine the relevant beliefs and values associated with one of the World's fastest growing religions Islam, which has over 1.5 billion worshippers worldwide, and the challenges these beliefs and values may present to the Olympic Games Movement and future host cities. The context for this examination is that the Olympic Games Movement is seeking to engage and encourage greater numbers of Muslim athletes and Muslim sport tourists to become part of this global mega event and movement. Within this paper's conceptual findings the influences that Islamic beliefs and values may have upon the modern day Olympic Games movement and future Olympic Games will be assessed. It will also be asserted that this influence is set to become more profound as the Olympic Games Movement seeks to attract greater numbers of Muslim athletes, especially Muslim females, and spectators both in person and via the global reach of modern day media. Additional growth factors examined relate to the staging of major and mega sporting events by emerging nations as part of their tourism destination development strategies. It is today being strongly suggested that prospects of a wealthy nation and city within the Muslim world hosting and staging a future Olympic Game are fast coming one step closer towards becoming a reality. Consequently the possible implications associated with this future occurrence requires acknowledgement and understanding.

**Key words:** Muslim sports tourist; Olympic Games; Islamic events.

### **Introduction**

The ancient Olympic Games were first staged in 776 BC in the Greek holy city of Olympia (Athens). Originally the games were staged as a unique festival and cult of human essence and were a non-secular vehicle of expression for the ancient Greeks to pay homage to their pagan Gods, this was classified as sports worship (Liao and Pitts, 2006). These pagan and polytheistic historical origins of the Olympic Games are the deep roots of western ideology, culture, and religion (Garcia, 2008). The modern day Olympic Games Movement and Olympic Games can trace their

beginnings to 1896 and their founder Baron Pierre de Coubertin a man who 'regarded sport as a religion' (Scharenberg, 1999). Coubertin (1999) founded the International Olympic Committee (IOC) establishing it as the governing body of the modern day Olympic Movement. Inherent with its foundations was a religious feeling aligned towards Christianity (Coubertin, 1909; Scharenberg, 1999). An Olympic Charter was established which today defines the structure, authority and spirit of the modern day Games which have evolved and grown over the past century in terms of the numbers of participants, events staged the sponsors and their levels of contributions and the games' importance as a global media event. The global media awareness and attention the Olympic Games attracts has brought them to an audience of billions, which has turned the Olympic Games into a mega sporting event (Gold and Gold, 2011). In addition to their actual growth, the budgeted cost associated with staging the modern day Olympic Games is quite considerable and runs to billions of US dollars.

The considerable cost implication of hosting and staging an Olympic Games still does not deter potential cities from seeking to host and stage the games as they are often aware of and are seeking the well defined and researched benefits. These benefits have been found to include 'social and economic gains...global marketing opportunities, infrastructure development, travel and tourism, urban regeneration programmes and city re-branding' (Girginov and Hills, 2008; Gold and Gold, 2008; Randeree, 2011). The modern Olympic Games and since 1988 the Paralympics have been hosted in 21 cities within 17 different countries worldwide. So far the vast majority of these countries have been within Europe (14), followed by the Americas (6), Asia (3) and Australia (2) (International Olympic Committee, 2011). This rotation policy is in need of change as the modern Olympic Games comes under pressure to reform and allow emerging nations to gain the benefits associated with its hosting. In addition, the Games need to demonstrate a commitment towards the multi-cultural and secular inclusion enshrined within the Olympic charter that states..

'the practice of sport is a human right. Every individual must have the possibility of practicing sport, without discrimination of any kind and in the Olympic spirit within a spirit of friendship' (International Olympic Committee, 2011).

The issue is further compounded by the fact that the ability of many developed nations to fund and justify the cost and legacy benefits of hosting the games has vastly diminished, in light of the global economic crisis of 2008. Global mega sporting events such as the Beijing 2008 Summer Olympics Games, the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics (Low and Hall, 2010), Rio de Janeiro 2016 Summer Olympics Games and Paralympics, and Brazil's World Cup 2014 are a realization in the global shift towards the hosting of mega sporting events within emerging countries (Bang, 2010). This is buoyed by Qatar's successful bid to host the 2018 FIFA Football World Cup, followed by strong indications that Qatar and Dubai will make a bid to host and stage the 2024 Olympic Games (Megson, 2009, Broomhall, 2011). Therefore, it may not be too far in the future that an Olympic Games will for the first time be hosted and staged within the emerging markets of the Muslim world.

Qatar's and Dubai's ambition to stage an Olympic Games has brought into focus the possible issues and challenges associated with hosting a mega sporting events within a non-secular Islamic country. These may present challenges for the Olympic Movement which has been founded upon western Christen beliefs and values. These challenges are being aired in the media, and they relate to the socio-cultural and religious beliefs and values inherent within the teaching and following of Islam which are very different to those found within the west. These Islamic beliefs and values by their very nature could present ideological contradiction to the western ideologically secular Olympic Movement and Olympic Games. This paper explores these issues in greater detail.

### **The Western Origins Of The Olympic Games**

The modern day Olympic Games, from their first establishment in 1896 to 2012, have been hosted sixteen times by European countries, five times by North America (USA and Canada), three times by Asia (Japan and South Korea, China ), twice by Australia and once by South America (Mexico) (see Table 1, below). This predominance of staging the games within the western developed world led to the Game's development having a profoundly western and Christian ideological and cultural bias that largely appeals to western sports participants and audiences. The 2008 Beijing Olympic Games was regarded as a major breakthrough and turning

**Table 1 Summer Olympic Game host cities since 1896**

1896 - Athens, Greece	1960 - Rome, Italy
1900 - Paris, France	1964 - Tokyo, Japan
1904 - St Louis, USA	1968 - Mexico City, Mexico
1908 - London, UK	1972 - Munich, West Germany (now Germany)
1912 - Stockholm, Sweden	1976 - Montreal, Canada
1916 - Scheduled for Berlin, Germany*	1980 - Moscow, USSR (now Russia)
1920 - Antwerp, Belgium	1984 - Los Angeles, USA
1924 - Paris, France	1988 - Seoul, South Korea
1928 - Amsterdam, Netherlands	1992 - Barcelona, Spain
1932 - Los Angeles, USA	1996 - Atlanta, USA
1936 - Berlin, Germany	2000 - Sydney, Australia
1940 - Scheduled for Tokyo, Japan*	2004 - Athens, Greece
1944 - Scheduled for London, UK*	2008 - Beijing, China
1948 - London, UK	2012 - London, UK
1952 - Helsinki, Finland	2016 - Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
1956 - Melbourne, Australia	
*Summer Olympic Games were not held in 1916, 1940 and 1944 with World War I and II.	

**(adapted from Rossenberg 2012)**

point in the history of hosting the Olympic Games as the event itself attracted a record number of participants (over 10,000 athletes) and millions of 'sport tourists' who, for the first time visited the games and watched in their billions as a part of a global TV audience, a global mega sporting event being stage in the east, within a non-western aligned country that did not have a predominantly Christian religion. Associated with this geographical shift in hosting the games, one of the most often overlooked topics with regards to the future staging of the Olympic Games is its movement into emerging markets and 'uncharted eastern territories' where the dominate religion is not Christian the societal influences are non-western and in many cases the countries are non-secular. The questions that emerge are

associated with the influence non-secular countries may have upon the Olympic Games Movement itself whose origins are deeply rooted in western and European ideologies and culture. Furthermore, impacts are to be considered with regards to the influence these non-western societies may have on future athletes' participation and the related appeal for spectators. Today the Olympic Games are seeking to appeal to potential host nations that may open up new markets with regards to participants, spectators and that have the financial resources needed to underpin the games long term sustainable future. Therefore, the words of Douglas (2012) citing the Olympic Charter are important - 'the practice of sport is a human right. Every individual must have the possibility of practicing sport, without discrimination of any kind and in the Olympic spirit...within a spirit of friendship'. This is a clear challenge, that the modern day games must demonstrate inclusion for all.

### **Future Hosting Of An Olympic Games**

The Olympic Games was originally established as a non-secular event. During their modern day re-incarnation, from 1896 the games embarked upon a period of development, driven by Coubertin's (1909) religious philosophy and spirit. Since then the growth of the Olympic Games and its hosting and staging has predominantly been in the western world where Christianity is the main religion and moreso, a Euro-centric cultural and societal philosophy prevails. The modern day Games face many challenges related to their complexity, need for inclusion and the overall cost associated with their hosting and staging, much of which is to be borne by the host city and nation. Any potential host city selected to stage an Olympic Games has had to demonstrate their financial capacity to host and stage the event and to has to allow a high level of global participation from the IOC member states. Furthermore, host cities must demonstrate a capability to reach out towards a global audience both in person and via media, to enable the commercial side of the games to generate sustainable revenues from ticket sales, sponsorship and media coverage. The global economic downturn which has had a profound impact on much of the developed world economies since 2008, has clearly hindered the staging of future Olympic Game by many developed nations since it is seen as not being finically viable. However, there is a shift in the global economic power base, which is seen as moving away from the traditional economies of the west towards the new and emerging markets typified by the BRICS nations (Brazil, Russia, India China and

South Africa) and the economically developing nations of the Middle East, Africa, and Pacific Asia. In these areas, a number of countries - Malaysia and Indonesian for example - have large Muslim populations.

Wealthy Muslim countries, many of which are non-secular, are increasingly being regarded as potential host nations for future events such as the Olympic Games. Randeree (2011) states 'it is important that the world soon witnesses an Olympic Games hosted by a city in the Muslim world' (Randeree, 2011). This has brought into focus the matter of a non-secular Islamic country as a future host city of a mega sporting events and the challenges the Olympic Games face as they seek to increase their appeal and presence within emerging markets and thus appealing to greater numbers of Muslim athletes, participants, sports tourists and spectators via the media. The contentious point relates to the fact that within an Islamic non-secular country 'Muslims do not distinguish between the religious and the secular but consider Islam to be a complete way of life' (Scott and Jafari, 2010).

As many of the socio-cultural and religious beliefs, values and philosophies inherent within the teachings of Islam are different to those found within the west (Stephenson, Russell and Edgar, 2010) by their nature they could present ideological contradiction for the western ideologically based Olympic Movement and spirit and even within the games themselves. Given these collisions of factors, the possible non-western and Islamic non-secular society influence on the modern Olympic Games Movement requires further examination.

### **The Third Major Religion - Islam**

Muslims are the followers of Islam, the third major Monotheistic religion to have arisen from the Middle East, Judaism and Christianity are the other two. All three religions have Abrahamic faith at their foundation and as such, all lay claim to a certain spiritual descent from a common ancestor – The Archangel Abraham. According to Catherwood 'Islam proclaims itself as a fulfilment of Judaism and Christianity' (2011; 4). Christianity and Islam, as the two global monotheistic faiths, both lay claim to being both uniquely as well as universally true, in what is seen as a clash of Universalisms (Tibi, 1998). Islamic tradition states that fear of God is the crown of knowledge. Bleher (2009) explaining the Islamic view of God states:

the name He takes is Allah, which is more than just 'God' in Arabic . . . 'God' (just as the Arabic word 'Ilah') can be put in the plural or change gender, there can be gods or goddesses. Allah on the other hand is unique; He has no equal and He shares His name with none else (Bleher, 2009).

Islamic philosophy is a practical guidance of religious, moral, social, political and economic ideology applicable to all areas of life. This is conveyed to followers of Islam via the Qur'an which is a living communication to human kind, akin to an 'instruction manual or travel guide' (Bleher, 2009). Fundamentally, Islam restricts the practices of other faiths that may threaten to undermine its social order and the wellbeing of its believers and citizens. Muslims are permitted to enter into inter faith marriage with other monotheistic faiths (Judaism and Christianity) but not with believers of polytheistic faiths. Islam, while emanated from the Middle East, is not confined to that region of the world. Historically, as a major religion, at its height the Islamic empire stretched from Spain to India, taking in Turkey and Greece, stretching to East Africa (Catherwood, 2011) and today it is seen globally as the fastest growing religion, with commentators claiming that there are 1.5 billion Muslims Worldwide. Muslims are the majority of the population in many Middle Eastern countries as well as other countries globally such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Nigeria (Stammer, 1996, Scott and Jafari, 2010).

### **Discussion**

Islam is a way of life for its followers. Therefore, Muslim participants and tourists at the Olympic Games should be regarded as Muslim Sports Tourists and as such their religious beliefs and values should not only be respected by event organisers and hosts, but where possible, their needs should be accommodated. Muslims should be allowed to follow their religious beliefs and values while participating, as either athletes or spectators. This requires the accommodation of their way of life which is guided by Islamic philosophy which is in some regards quite different to western philosophies, ways of life, Eurocentric ideological and cultural basis. Islam requires Muslims to not distinguish between religious following and duties and everyday life – a way of life that is derived from the teaching of the Qur'an (Ramadan, 2009, Pickthall, 2011). Within Islam, adherence to an Islamic way of life and its beliefs and values requires a follower to obey many rules to ensure religion is an integral part of



daily life. Some of the specific Islamic beliefs and values that present the Olympic Movement with challenges will be now be discussed.

### **Worship and praise**

Today it is common place for an athlete, especially victorious ones; in many sports to be afforded media 'air time'. This time is often used to gauge how the athlete feels after their achievement. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this opportunity is increasingly being used by athletes of all religious denomination to show thanks and to praise God and to openly demonstrate their religious beliefs and practice in public. Athletes in all sports can be seen to be demonstrating their faith in gestures made - from touching the ground, performing faith-like signs of crossing themselves, pointing towards the sky and towards God, offering prayer, kneeling in prayer on the sports field and giving verbal thanks to God often after some sort of success.

Muslim athletes will often be seen to go to their knees in a prayer to Allah or to hold their hands out in front of their body in the Muslim gesture of prayer. Also, when spoken to by the media, first and foremost many give thanks to God or the Almighty Allah as a public sign of their faith and beliefs. This declaration of faith, while not only restricted to Muslims, will be difficult to manage, eradicate or legislate against and indeed may become more common place as Muslim athletes and Muslim sports tourist begin to make up sizable numbers at the Olympic Games. A further element exists in respect of Muslim daily prayers. Olympic venues will need to provide a mosque / prayer room or multi faith room, alongside which signage will have to be provided to clearly indicate to worshippers the direction of Mekkah. Such signage will be required both within the Mosque/prayer area and within the participant / athlete's accommodation. Will such a Mosque have to issues five daily calls to prayer; and will such a practice allow Muslim athletes the right to conduct their five daily prayers on the Olympic site.

### **Gender segregation**

Indications are that a growing number of female Muslim athletes are expected as participants at future Olympic Games. For the first time in the history of their IOC membership, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Brunei sent female athletes to compete in the London 2012 Olympic Games (Shane, 2012). The decision to send female Muslim athletes from these and many other countries has been debated at the very top

levels of both government and monarchy within these male dominated countries, and member states (Ferris-Lay, 2012). However, the ultimate decision to allow Muslim female athletes to compete at future games will be made by men, in accordance with their interpretation of Islam teachings (Badawi, 2011). Due to the beliefs and values of Islam in relation to gender and gender socializing, if Muslim female athletes are allowed by their government and National Olympic Association to participate, the village for Muslim female athletes will require;

- gender segregated accommodate,
- prayer rooms,
- social and eating areas, which maybe in the form of actual separate buildings for both male and female athletes,

### **Dress code**

Dress code and in particular the factor of female modesty has been raised as an issue at the Olympic in the past, with some sport federations banning the Muslim veil and the covering of hair (Pfister. 2010). However, changes in many sporting federation rules now allow for female athletes to compete while wearing a head coving or headscarf. Female modesty in terms of dress may mean that some female Muslim athletes will not take part in particular sports, for example beach volleyball and swimming events, where the dress code may contradict Islamic beliefs regarding modest dress (Pfister, 2010, Badawi, 2011). Equally, some sports, such as female beach volleyball, may potentially offend Muslim spectators in conservative Muslim countries, therefore these events may not be aired or indeed staged as the attire of these female athletes maybe seen as counter to the dress codes as stated and interpreted in relation the Quran within some Islamic countries.

### **Food and drink**

Muslims are forbidden from eating any meat that has not been slaughtered in the Halal way, as prescribed by the Qur'an. Food items need to be clearly labelled as 'Halal' so that Muslims do not intentionally counter their religious dietary beliefs. Islamic teaching also prohibits Muslims for consuming pork and any food that

contains pork fat or pork galantine. They are also not allowed to consume any form of alcoholic beverage or narcotics and in some instances the consumption or presence of such items at an event may cause offense as they are counter to the teaching of Islam.

### **Conclusions**

The conceptual findings of this paper seek to understand the challenges related to Muslim athletes and Muslim sports pilgrims who are obligated to view their participation in sporting mega events as being interlinked with their Islamic faith. Furthermore, the paper aimed to comment on the role of the IOC in seeking to bring about greater Muslim participation in the Olympic spirit and movement and the possible future hosting and staging of an Olympic Games within a non-secular Islamic country. Historically, and also over the past 100 years, the Olympic Movement and Olympic Games have been firmly rooted in western ideology and religion. Today, the Olympic Games is seeking to be a modern-day mega sporting event that is secular, but like many major sporting events it is often used as a vehicle for the expression by both participants and spectators of patriotism and spiritual faith. This is borne out by many acts declaring and expressing faith, often witnessed when an athlete is successful in an event. These non-secular actions have led to an almost inherent believe that to attend the Olympic Games, as either an athlete or spectator is a pilgrimage. Participants often affirm and give praise to their religious beliefs, demonstrating how they follow particular religious teachings.

The IOC will need to be mindful of many factors and practices related to Islam; this understanding is required to further the popularity of the Olympic Games both within Islamic countries and with Muslim athletes of both genders, and Muslim sport tourists and spectators. The practices and policies adopted by the IOC, and National Olympic Committees (NOC) may influence not only the exciting challenge of staging future Olympic Games in a Muslim country such as Qatar or Dubai, but in all countries. Acknowledging these factors and adapting the Olympic Games ethos may greatly influence a growth in participation by Muslim athletes of both genders. It may also result in growing interest for the Games by Muslim audiences and Muslim sport pilgrims, thereby enhancing the Game's growing legacy and commercial appeal.

This research has articulated both the development of the Olympic Games and its movement which historically has been interlinked with western, Eurocentric and Christian ideologies and philosophies. However, the long terms sustainable future of the Games appears to be closely aligned to developments taking place in the financially wealthy emerging world nations. This paper has examined some of the main beliefs and values within the Islamic faith, which are believed to present the Olympic Movement and the IOC with major challenges. It is suggested that the Islamic faith may have major impacts upon the future of the Olympic Games. Islamic beliefs and values are significant and important for many Muslim athletes and Muslim sports pilgrims as 'Islam is not just a religion, but a way of life for Muslims, so for followers, Islam is a real-life-orientation' (Hattstein, 2006) that the International Olympic Movement, the IOC and the Olympic Games must embrace.

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**Author details:**

**Karl A. Russell** is a Senior Lecturer in Hospitality Management at the University of Sunderland. He is a professional member of the Institute of Hospitality Management and he has held teaching posts in England, Scotland, Switzerland, United Arab Emirates and Iran. His research interests are in strategic hospitality management and competitive advantage within emerging markets and Islamic Hospitality. He has extensive research and consultancy experience in the UK, Switzerland and The Middle East.

E-mail: [karl.russell@sunderland.ac.uk](mailto:karl.russell@sunderland.ac.uk)

**Noëlle O'Connor** is a Senior Lecturer in Tourism and Hospitality Studies and Course Director for the Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Business Studies with Event Management Programme in Limerick Institute of Technology (Ireland). Noëlle edited the book *Tourism and Hospitality Research in Ireland* (2007) and also published *A Film Marketing Action Plan for Film Induced Tourism Destinations - Using Yorkshire as a Case Study* (2010). Her research focus is in the area of film induced tourism, social media, celebrity endorsement of tourism destinations, destination branding and tourism education.

Email: [noelle.oconnor@lit.ie](mailto:noelle.oconnor@lit.ie)