

The Passion of the Tebow: Sports Media and Heroic Language in the Tragic Frame

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As one of the most widely covered athletes of recent years, Tim Tebow is both beloved and resented. In this essay, I critique sports media coverage of Tebow to demonstrate how tragic framing constitutes this opposition. By emphasizing his character both as a football leader and a Christian missionary, sports media frame Tebow in transcendental terms, the consequence of which is a discourse of absolutism and symbolic division. What is required, therefore, is a turn to Kenneth Burke's notion of the comic frame, a position of humility that is well-suited to the agonistic ethos of commercial sport.

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On December 17, 2011, *Saturday Night Live* (SNL) presented a skit premised on the rather incredulous notion that Jesus Christ had orchestrated a series of improbable come-from-behind victories for the Denver Broncos of the National Football League (NFL). Such divine intervention was depicted as a response to the persistent and public declarations of faith made by the Broncos' quarterback, Tim Tebow. Widely regarded as a marginal professional quarterback, Tebow nevertheless became the biggest story during the 2011 NFL regular season, propelled to fame by a conspicuous Christianity that served as a backdrop to both his off-field persona and his on-field success. Less than a month after the SNL skit, on January 12, 2012, late-night host Jimmy Fallon performed as "Tebowie"—a cross between Tim Tebow and David Bowie—as he parodied Bowie's "Space Oddity" with lyrics that imagined

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a conversation between Tebow and Jesus Christ. These highly publicized comedic responses merely confirmed what had become obvious in the late months of 2011: Tim Tebow was more than an NFL quarterback; he was a cultural phenomenon.

Tim Tebow is far from the first professional athlete to feature his Christianity publicly, but he has received unprecedented adulation and criticism because of it. That his ascendance as an NFL quarterback has prompted so much attention—both positive and negative, but nearly all of it *intense*—reveals much about the uneasy space religion occupies in American public culture. Beloved by millions who value his faith, competitiveness, and humility, he is simultaneously derided by those who find his proselytizing to be a means of self-promotion or would prefer he simply kept his faith to himself. This division of popular opinion is not entirely new, as Tebow's well-publicized collegiate career at the University of Florida earned him relentless praise even as it sparked rampant hostility from non-Gators fans. By the time Tebow's career at Florida reached its conclusion, he had become, as ESPN's Chris Fowler noted, "a very polarizing figure" ("Tebow's farewell," 2009).

I argue in this paper that public animosity toward Tim Tebow can be understood, at least in part, as an outcome of sports media coverage. He has been central in sports media not only because he is an outstanding athlete, but also because he is presented as being an outstanding human being. Broadcasters praise Tebow's commitment to Christian principles, magazine cover stories promote his sense of mission, and cameras make his face ubiquitous, often shown with the eye black inscribed with Biblical passages, such as Philippians 4:13 ("I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me"). All the while he is hailed as an ideal leader, a model citizen, and tireless evangelical. Through all the praise, one might conclude that sports media have mistaken Tebow for Christ himself.

Following his successful collegiate career, Tebow is now in the early stages of an NFL career that has once again divided the sports community, this time over speculations about his ultimate success as a professional. Although most football analysts argue that Tebow's considerable athletic ability does not translate well to the professional game, fans nevertheless have supported him with surprising devotion. After being drafted by the Denver Broncos in 2010, his number 15 became the league's highest selling jersey ("Tim Tebow Broncos," 2010), and, by the 2011 season, some Denver fans went so far as to order customized Broncos jerseys with Tebow's number 15 and "Jesus" appearing on the back. In the early stages of the 2011 season, a group of Broncos fans, so dissatisfied with Tebow's third-string status, spent \$10,000 to purchase local billboards calling for Tebow to become the team's starting quarterback ("Fans plan," 2011). Shortly thereafter, they got their wish, whereupon the Broncos suddenly began winning games even though their new quarterback rarely played well. As he became the biggest story of the season, sports media features of Tebow exploded, with some pondering whether or not God had a rooting interest in Broncos games (Strachan, 2012). By the time Tebow led Denver to a stunning playoff victory over the Pittsburgh Steelers, an ESPN poll revealed him to be "America's favorite active pro athlete" ("Poll," 2012, ¶ 1).

Even after a trade from Denver to the New York Jets in early 2012, Tebow continues to be featured prominently in sports media. To understand his status as a public

figure requires placing it in the context of an expanding discourse of evangelical Christianity in sport. It has become commonplace in American sports to see and hear public declarations of Christian faith, and it is similarly common that evangelical organizations work with sports leagues and teams behind the scenes. More than simply a site to recruit new members, the articulation of evangelical Christianity with sport is a reflection of cultural and political shifts that have occurred in the past four decades in the United States. As Krattenmaker (2010) suggests, “The infusion of evangelical Christianity in major league sports has been one of the most visible manifestations—one of the most potent thrusts—of [a] counteroffensive by evangelical America to influence our culture and turn our country in a more Christian, and more conservative, direction” (p. 15). Indeed, the increasing visibility of conservative Christianity in sport legitimizes particular political positions that, while appealing to certain segments of the population, threaten to undermine sport’s potential to foster diversity and inclusiveness (Butterworth, 2011).

This movement in conservative Christianity is most commonly associated with Americans who happen to be *white*. Accordingly, it is significant that Tim Tebow embodies white Anglo-Saxon normativity. In the words of sportswriter Greg Doyel (2011), Tebow is the “WASPiest WASP in this great big WASP nest we call America” (§ 4). This is not to suggest that media coverage of Tebow projects some form of overt racism. Rather, it is a reminder that sports media commonly default to racial norms when constructing mythical heroes (Butterworth, 2007; Griffin & Calafell, 2011). These norms tend to reinforce “white” ideals rooted in masculine character and leadership. Furthermore, despite substantive moments when it has either reflected or facilitated racial inclusion, sport remains a conflicted terrain with regard to race. Indeed, the success of African American athletes in the high-profile sports of basketball and football has destabilized the historical dominance of white masculinity and thus prompts quests for finding athletic heroes who are white (Oates, 2007).

In light of these political, religious, and racial articulations, and given Tebow’s athletic accomplishments and evangelical ambitions, a critical assessment of Tim Tebow sports media coverage is warranted. In this essay, I critique this coverage as an exemplar of what Kenneth Burke (1984) calls the tragic frame. I begin by outlining an approach drawn from Ott and Aoki’s (2002) work that articulates Burke’s rhetorical theory with frame analysis methodology. Next, I examine how sports media coverage frames Tebow not only as a superlative athlete but also as an individual who is something more than human. Last, I turn to the rhetorical consequences of making transcendental heroes out of our sports superstars. Tebow may be one of the great college football players of our time, but he remains human. My argument, then, demands that sports media and other observers learn to see the world through more comic, humble eyes.

Tragic Framing

Frame analysis is a well-established method in media effects scholarship, especially as it pertains to public opinion and agenda-setting. Framing scholars argue that news media “frame” an audience’s interpretation of events, people, or ideas

(Goffman, 1974), in particular by “selecting” specific elements and ignoring others (Gitlin, 1980). It has been employed by numerous scholars to identify media frames in the coverage of events ranging from politics (Entman, 2003; Gamson, 1992; Iyengar, 1991) to sports (Angelini & Billings, 2010; Billings & Angelini, 2007; Billings & Eastman, 2003; Delgado, 2003; Hardin, Lynn, Walsfork, & Hardin, 2002). Yet, Ott and Aoki (2002) have identified a consonance between media frames and Burke’s (1966) conception of “terministic screens” that allows critics to integrate frame analysis with rhetorical criticism to make sense of mediated ideological effects. Inspired by two photographs of the same object taken with different color filters, Burke (1966) developed his notion of the “terministic screen” as a rhetorical equivalent of a camera filter. As he contends:

Not only does the nature of our terms affect the nature of our observations, in the sense that the terms direct the *attention* to one field rather than to another. Also, *many of the “observations” are but implications of the particular terminology in terms of which the observations are made.* In brief, much that we take as observations about “reality” may be but the spinning out of possibilities implicit in our particular choice of terms. (p. 46)

With this in mind, he insists that “if any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality” (p. 45).

Burke argues that human interaction is best understood through the metaphor of drama, in which people act within *frames of acceptance* or *frames of rejection*. Whereas frames of rejection operate outside cultural norms, frames of acceptance seek cooperation within a culture’s boundaries. Burke further delineates between frames of acceptance, however, arguing that humans act dramatically within a tragedy or comedy. Ott and Aoki’s (2002) critique of newspaper accounts of the murder of Matthew Shepard and the public responses to this coverage reveal shortcomings of tragic discourses. In particular, they note that in the rush to demonize the two men who brutally killed Shepard, a tragic frame enabled the community to “reach a symbolic resolution without turning the event into a lesson for those involved” (Ott & Aoki, 2002, p. 496). Consequently, the *framing* of the Shepard murder yielded a rhetorical effect by which the broader community could decry the tragedy without having to be held accountable for it. To Burke’s regret, such an effect is typical, as humans enact the tragic frame far more readily and with more serious consequences. The tragic frame, he insists, inflates the importance of people, ideas, and events to the point of creating a world of absolutes, which commonly results in a language of sacrifice, victimage, and violence. In short, tragedy is Burke’s “label of choice for the extremes of rhetorical . . . appeal” (Appel, 2008, p. 185). When such extremes are invoked, humans are more apt to do harm to one another, either symbolically or by means of violence. Moreover, tragic framing positions audiences ideologically in ways that disable critical interrogations of salient public issues (Foust & O’Shannon Murphy, 2009; Singer, 2011).

In light of these concerns, the trick is to re-frame the drama in terms of comedy. Comedy is a *corrective* to the exaggerations and hubris of tragedy. In the words of Olson (2007):

A comic frame on events also has nothing to do with whether the event content is serious or humorous. Rather, the comic frame is defined by a posture of humility, gentle prodding, and optimism for a better shared future through a repaired social order instead of punishment; unlike the tragic frame, the comic frame does not require winners and losers. (pp. 268–269)

Sport, of course, always involves winners and losers, which may suggest that it is ill-suited to a comic frame. Moreover, the bluster, hyperbole, and extremes that are common characteristics of sports and sports media coverage too often risk elevating athletes and games to levels beyond the human. Thus, the absolutism of the tragic frame is frequently on display in sports, as athletes, announcers, columnists, talk show hosts, and fans seem endlessly engaged in making loud, definitive, and *antagonistic* commentary.

For Burke, tragedy belongs to the cosmic realm, whereas comedy “deals with *man* (sic) *in society*” (1984, p. 42). The comic corrective, then, seeks to redress the divisions of society through rhetoric’s compensatory ability to foster identification (K. Burke, 1969, pp. 21–22). This attitude does not deny the existence of difference, but rather depends on an “‘agonistic’ or competitive stress” (K. Burke, 1969, p. 52). It is this shift from antagonism to agonism that makes sports a suitable site for the comic frame, after all. Indeed, sports’ winners and losers last only as long as the given contest or season, and even the most intense rivalries depend on the mutual respect of a worthy adversary. All of this is to say that sports are probably best understood, and are likewise most healthy for human interaction, when they remain playful, humble, and *comic*.

Regrettably, far too much sports media coverage takes itself seriously. Whether it is through declarations that yet another event is the “game of the century,” the minute-to-minute attention given to developing scandals, or the proclamation of a new athlete as the “greatest ever,” sports media construct a tragic frame out of what should be a comedy. Although many athletes have benefitted from an almost god-like adulation—think Brett Favre, for instance¹—Tim Tebow represents something different. Not only has he been hailed as a savior on the field, his public and passionate Christian faith has made him a transcendental figure off the field, as well. With Tebow now in the NFL, it is evident that the stakes grow larger for him, and for everyone whom he has the power to reach. Since completing his playing career at the University of Florida, Tebow has appeared in a controversial Focus on the Family Super Bowl commercial in 2010, developed his own foundation designed to further his evangelical outreach, and popularized a form of public prayer—one knee on the ground, elbow on the knee, and head bowed—simply labeled, “Tebowing.” Tebow’s public platform as a high-profile athlete combined with his religious message make a combustible mix, for, as Burke would remind us, “religion, at least Western religion,

tends to work out of the tragic frame” (Appel, 2008, p. 186). Thus, with the dangers of tragedy in mind, I now turn to the ways in which sports media have constituted Tim Tebow through tragic framing.

A Passion for Tebow

In order to evaluate sports media coverage in the context of tragic framing, I began with a search for articles at ESPN.com, EBSCO Academic Search Complete, and Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe. I used a combination of search terms, including “Tebow and faith,” “Tebow and character,” “Tebow and religion,” and “Tebow and mission.” These search terms yielded 294 total articles from ESPN, 28 from EBSCO, and eight from Lexis-Nexis. In addition, I relied on internet hyperlinks, my own subscription to *Sports Illustrated*, and my viewing of high-profile media productions, such as the 2007 telecast of the Heisman trophy ceremony. After reviewing these sources, I included for this study only those which made the case that Tebow demonstrated either football-based or character-based traits that were exceptional or unusual. Because Tebow’s professional career remains a work in progress, I focus primarily on his four seasons at the University of Florida, from 2006–2009. I do make occasional references to his NFL career, especially as a means to demonstrate that sports media coverage continues to reflect problematic frames.

The sports media’s obsession with Tim Tebow began before his arrival at Florida, most notably with an ESPN documentary, *Tim Tebow: The Chosen One*, which aired originally on December 13, 2005.² The one-hour film chronicled Tebow’s final season at Nease High School in Florida, weaving together storylines of his team’s state championship, efforts of high-profile college football recruiters, and his commitment to Christianity. This last feature, in particular, twinned Tebow’s faith with others’ faith in Tebow, reflected most obviously in the documentary’s title. By the time he arrived at Florida, sports fans and media alike were poised to anoint him once again as the chosen one. In the process, media coverage framed him in tragic language, situating him not as a man in society, but as some force within the cosmos. At least two frames, both of which are grounded in his *character*, reveal this tragic tendency: Tebow as quarterback and Tebow as missionary.

Tebow as Quarterback

As is evident in *The Chosen One*, many were predicting historic greatness for Tim Tebow before he played a down in college (let alone the NFL). Early in the documentary, Tebow is compared favorably to other great collegiate quarterbacks, such as Alex Smith and Michael Vick, as well as Hall of Fame caliber NFL quarterbacks, such as Brett Favre and Steve Young. By the time his career at Florida concluded, he had won two national championships—once as a back-up and once as a starter—one Heisman trophy, and countless additional accolades. A great deal of discussion, therefore, turned to whether or not Tebow could be understood as the greatest college football player in history. For example, during the 2009 BCS

Championship Game, when Tebow led Florida to a 24–14 victory over Oklahoma, announcer Thom Brennaman suggested that “you begin the conversation now when you talk about greatest players in the history of college football. Tim Tebow, a pair of national championships and a Heisman Trophy award in three years. He is unquestionably in that Top 10, perhaps now in that Top 5” (quoted in “We Haven’t Spent,” 2009, ¶ 2). The next day, *Los Angeles Times* columnist Bill Plaschke called Tebow “the perfect player who made us forget college football’s imperfect system [the lack of a playoff to determine a ‘true’ champion]” (Plaschke, 2009, ¶ 4). Tebow’s perfection can be summarized, in part, by his career statistical accomplishments. Yet ESPN’s Ivan Maisel (2009) exemplified what is the more common perception when he stated, “Tebow’s value as a player—he has passed and run for 8,427 yards and 110 touchdowns—is surpassed only by his value as a leader” (¶ 6).

Other college football players have been praised for their measurable achievements, but it is in the admiration for Tebow’s leadership skills that sports media coverage takes on a different quality. In the early moments of *The Chosen One*, for example, Tebow is credited with having uncommon toughness and competitive fire. “We can’t be stopped!” he shouts to his teammates in the huddle, before adding, “I cannot be stopped!” Later in the documentary, viewers learn that this sequence took place after Tebow sustained an injury that threatened to derail Nease High School’s march to a state championship in 2005. The scene valorizes the quarterback’s “toughness” and “courage” by recalling a game in 2003, when Tebow led his team to a victory while playing half the game on a broken fibula. When he was injured during the game in 2005, his coach states with obvious admiration, “You’re the toughest guy I’ve ever met in my life.” The flashback to Tebow’s sophomore season is spliced with the account of his senior season injury in order to solidify his image as an unparalleled competitor. Tebow himself confirms this, by insisting that the measure of “character” is the ability to “push through adversity.” Consistent with other media coverage of football (Trujillo, 1995), Tebow’s ability to play through pain and injury is framed as an example of positive leadership rather than questioned for its potential to cause further injury to himself or establish an unreasonable threshold for the tolerance of pain for others.

This exemplary leadership was emphasized by nearly every telecast of a Florida football game, which included innumerable references to teammates’ willingness to follow him. Yet it is arguably a postgame press conference that best encapsulates the sports media’s fascination with the quarterback’s competitiveness. Following a narrow loss—at home—to conference opponent, Mississippi, Tebow concluded his appearance before the media with this passionate declaration:

To the fans and everybody in Gator Nation, I’m sorry. I’m extremely sorry. We were hoping for an undefeated season. That was my goal, something Florida has never done here. I promise you one thing. A lot of good will come out of this. You will never see any player in the entire country play as hard as I will play the rest of the season. You will never see someone push the rest of the team as hard as I will push everybody the rest of the season. You will never see a team play harder than we will the rest of the season. God bless.

Now referred to as “the promise” or “the pledge,” these words are forever inscribed on a plaque outside the University of Florida football complex (“Tim Tebow’s Promise,” 2010). The post-game speech is arguably the most famous moment of Tebow’s collegiate career, and for many it embodies his ability to lead. For instance, James Bates, who was a captain with the 1996 Florida national championship team, declared that “Tebow is not only one of the best college football players of all time, but one of the best leaders of all time. It just seems to me like everything he says and does is that speech” (quoted in Adelson, 2009, ¶ 10).

While the Gators’ subsequent national championship appeared to confirm the seriousness of Tebow’s commitment and motivational skill, he later looked to prove himself at the professional level. In 2011, he took over for a Broncos team that began the season 1–4. When Denver won six consecutive games with him as the starter, commentators acknowledged that he was not playing particularly well, and thus surmised that the winning streak could only be attributed to Tebow’s unique leadership skills. Among the countless columns and pregame feature stories, a representative example came from NFL Videos, which summoned assessments of Tebow’s leadership from a former U.S. Navy Commander, a body language expert, the mayor of Denver, and the governor of Colorado, all of whom concluded that the Broncos quarterback was both an exemplary and an infectious leader (“Tebow’s leadership,” 2012).

Sports media commentary about Tebow’s leadership qualities demonstrated a tendency in language most revealed by Plaschke’s reference to “perfection.” In Burke’s dramaturgic theory, he warns of the “principle of perfection,” reminding us that “‘perfection’ means *literally* a *finishedness*. The ‘perfect’ is the *completely done*” (1966, p. 26). In other words, the rhetoric of perfection pushes humans toward the absolutism of the tragic frame. We know that Tim Tebow is not perfect, of course, but he becomes perfected in the context of tragic language. Such language is persuasive because rhetoric is an inducement to attitude. If a community’s attitude allows a human being to be viewed as “completely done,” there surely will be consequences. I will return to these concerns later in this essay.

If Tebow’s prowess as a player has been well documented, so too are the references to his “character.” Without exception, sports media have referred to him as “nice,” “polite,” “sincere,” and other similar terms. Early in his Florida career, Chris Fowler, host of ESPN’s popular “College Gameday” pregame program, made a special point to refer to the quarterback as “Mr. Tebow,” because the young player had insisted on calling the host “Mr. Fowler.” Fowler concluded that “unless you’re a Gator hater, it is hard not to like Tebow” (Fowler, 2007, ¶ 25). These sentiments were extended by Fowler’s ESPN colleagues, Kirk Herbstreit and Lee Corso, during the telecast of the 2007 Heisman Trophy ceremony, where Tebow was honored with the sport’s most prestigious award. At the conclusion of the event, Herbstreit concluded, “You think about ambassadors for this award, and you think about ambassadors for college football, I don’t know if you’re gonna find a better guy than Tim Tebow.” Corso then added, “I don’t know if we’ve ever had a better winner for college football and life than Tim Tebow.” Perhaps most effusive in his praise was Brennaman, who described

Tebow during the 2009 BCS Championship Game by suggesting that “if you’re fortunate enough to spend five minutes or 20 minutes around Tim Tebow, your life is better for it” (C. Burke, 2009, ¶ 3). Later, when the quarterback received a rare penalty for unsportsmanlike conduct, Brennaman earnestly declared, “That might be the first thing he’s ever done wrong” (C. Burke, 2009, ¶ 4). Even the former coach of one of Florida’s biggest rivals, the University of Georgia, Vince Dooley, has gushed about Tebow’s character. As he put it, “Football. Athleticism. Leadership. Charity work. His faith. You name it. I’ve never seen anybody who had all that in one package” (quoted in Wieberg, 2009, ¶ 7).

Tebow also has something else: he is white. I am not suggesting that members of the sports media have consciously favored Tebow because of race; indeed, I encountered no explicit mention of his race in any of the coverage I analyzed for this essay. However, it is crucial to recall “the extent to which whiteness is a taken-for-granted norm in discussions about race and how sports media produce and perpetuate a discourse that privileges whiteness” (Butterworth, 2007, p. 229). White normativity figures prominently in coverage of Tebow not because he is described in terms of race, but because of the historic associations that have been made in sports media about race, leadership, and “character,” especially when attributed to quarterbacks. As Grano (2010) points out, “Quarterbacks are *the* archetypal figures of white athletic character fantasies” (p. 267). Despite the success of African American quarterbacks such as Steve McNair, Donovan McNabb, and Michael Vick, the articulation of character with whiteness remains pervasive. In his study of ESPN commentary during the NFL Draft, Grano (2010) argues persuasively that sports media continue to perpetuate a black/white dichotomy when it comes to the quarterback position. In particular, commentators evaluated prospects and draft picks using terminology that regularly assigned characterological flaws to African Americans while praising whites for evidence of character found in attributes such as “leadership,” “aptitude,” and “moxie” (p. 268). Indeed, these are precisely the attributes for which Tebow was praised both in advance of the NFL Draft in 2010 and during his run of success with the Broncos in 2011.

Tebow as Missionary

Tebow’s racial identity figures prominently into an additional frame in sports media coverage. As Delgado (2003) reminds us, frames cannot be understood as monolithic. Rather, frames may contradict, diverge from, or overlap with one another. Indeed, the ubiquitous references to character collapse the distinctions between Tebow as a football player and Tebow as a Christian. Despite this, it is often the case that one frame is dominant, and although much of the sports media’s attention was directed specifically at his football playing ability, it is fair to conclude that a religiously inflected account of Tim Tebow has become the more influential frame. Austin Murphy (2009) writes in *Sports Illustrated* that, for Tim Tebow, “the football phase of his life is merely a means to a greater end” (p. 58). In *GQ*, Jason Fagone (2009) refers to him as “a Christian missionary trying to send a broader message through the

medium of America's most popular game" (§ 1). Meanwhile, the choice to name a documentary about him *The Chosen One* reflects a messianic frame even before Tebow was a national figure. This framing affirms the dominant portrayal of Tebow as a Christian who just happens to be a great football player. Although sports media are largely responsible for this language, they have been assisted in this effort by the Tebow family, which has repeatedly insisted that football is merely the gateway to an evangelical Christian mission. In Tim Tebow's words, "[Football's] the platform the Lord has given me, and I think it's my responsibility to take advantage of it" (quoted in Schlabach, 2008, § 10). Indeed, he has, as Tebow's efforts to reach out to prisoners and his missionary trips to the Philippines have been given extensive coverage by sports media.

Going to the Philippines serves to make real the promise of Tebow's religious convictions. *The Chosen One*, for example, features a sequence that describes the missionary work started by Tebow's father, Bob. Complemented by video of a smiling Tim playing with laughing children, the narration states plainly, "Bob Tebow's life's work is as a missionary in the Philippines, and Tim was born there 17 years ago, answering his father's prayer [for another son] and becoming the fifth child in the Tebow family." The sequence works enthymematically by equating the presence of the Tebow family (specifically, the Bob Tebow Evangelical Association) with the production of happy Filipino children. Left unexamined, of course, is whether or not the religious content of this mission work is an appropriate intervention in the lives of these children half a world away from the United States. Instead, *The Chosen One's* narration assumes that if the Tebow family makes repeated visits to work with poor children then it necessarily is something to be admired.

It is impossible to escape the colonialist implications of these mission trips. When in the Philippines, Tebow performs his moniker of the "chosen one," acting as a benevolent guide into the civilized, and Christianized, world. That Tebow is white and the children depicted in the film are brown-skinned only amplifies the message. While there is nothing *inherently* white about Christianity, Dyer (1997) observes that in Western civilization the two have become discursively linked. As he states, "Not only did Christianity become the religion, and religious export of Europe, indelibly marking its culture and consciousness, it has also been thought and felt in distinctly white ways for most of its history" (p. 17). This historical articulation between Christianity and whiteness is a reminder that race is a critical, if largely unstated, factor in the mediated portrayal of Tim Tebow.

ESPN was far from the only sports media outlet to feature Tebow's trips to the Philippines. Other media also focused on his interactions with children, most notably that he assisted with several circumcisions. Of the procedure, he remarked, "It's pretty nerve-racking at first, but you get your hands under control and do the work. It's pretty cool" (quoted in Schlabach, 2008). Also cool, it would seem, is the influence he has had on the millions of college football viewers in the United States. Among Tebow's calling cards is the eye black inscribed with Biblical verses. Initially he used only Philippians 4:13 ("I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me"), but eventually he used a new passage for each game. When he featured

John 3:16 (“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life”), it precipitated nearly 100 million searches on Google. In sports columnist Christine Brennan’s (2009) judgment, “the notion that people were looking up a Bible verse while watching a college football game is about as rare and refreshing as a true sophomore winning the Heisman Trophy (There’s been only one of those, of course: Tebow)” (§ 12). As further evidence that people were taking note of the eye black, “Florida fans [urged] everyone to wear eye black Saturday—with or without inscribed bible verses—in honor of quarterback Tim Tebow’s final home game” (Low, 2009, § 1). Tebow’s effect on fans and observers has only intensified now that he is in the NFL. When he spoke during the 2012 Easter service at Celebration Church in Georgetown, Texas, for example, more than 15,000 people came to hear him. In the words of Pastor Joe Champion, “In Christianity, it’s the Pope and Tim Tebow right now. We didn’t have enough room to handle the Pope” (“Tebow big,” 2012, §2).

Yet, perhaps the Tebow-as-Messiah narrative is most prominent in his life story, which began with his birth in the Philippines. Sports media have now reported the details of Tebow’s birth often enough and with enough reverence to grant it a religious significance of its own. The now familiar narrative has Bob and Pam Tebow praying to God for a fifth child, preferably a son to raise as a preacher. A difficult pregnancy and a bout with amebic dysentery briefly put Pam in a coma and local doctors advised that she abort the fetus. She refused and after Tim was born she referred to him as a “miracle baby” (Murphy, 2009). Both *The Chosen One* and the video produced to introduce Tebow during the 2007 Heisman Trophy ceremony repeat this story. In the documentary, Bob insists that “God just protected it the whole nine months. He’s a miracle baby.” During the Heisman video sequence, he states, “He’s a miracle baby, and so we have reminded him of that hundreds of times.” The suggestion that Tebow’s birth was somehow miraculous does more than simply remind sports fans that his mother faced significant health challenges during her pregnancy. Instead, it situates Tebow’s life in a prophetic discourse, one that hails its protagonist as a figure of truth and moral righteousness. As Darsey (1997) reminds us, all of this is consistent with a prophetic rhetorical tradition in which the figure of the prophet—in this case, Tim Tebow—serves as a conduit for the word of God Himself.

The religious convictions of the Tebow family provide the subtext to the controversial 2010 Super Bowl commercial that featured Pam and Tim. The 30-second spot was produced by the conservative religious organization, Focus on the Family, as part of a campaign called, “Celebrate Family. Celebrate Life.” It prompted harsh criticism from women’s advocacy groups and other progressive political organizations, mostly for its implied anti-abortion message. The ad does not mention abortion; however it spotlights the “miracle baby” story as told by Pam before prompting viewers to learn more by visiting Focus on the Family’s website. Tim actually appears only briefly at the end of the spot, when he “tackles” then hugs his mom. Although the commercial was far more subtle than many critics had feared it would be, it nevertheless insisted that Pam’s moral courage that led her to refuse an

abortion was the necessary condition for a subsequent “miracle.” Thus, beyond the political contest over abortion rights, the ad also served to deify Tim Tebow and sedimented the already prevalent comparisons made between Tebow and Jesus.

If football skill and motivational ability are not enough to constitute perfection, then conflating Tebow with Jesus Christ perhaps is. What is particularly interesting is that the sportswriters cited throughout this essay, many of whom likely do not share Tebow’s specific religious convictions, are nearly universally in awe of his faith. With that awe comes an almost passive acceptance that, because Tebow is religious, this is necessarily a good thing. This, too, is the tragic frame at work, for it accepts the absolutism of faith without interrogating the dimensions of that faith. By all accounts, Tebow appears to be every bit the “nice” and “sincere” person he is portrayed to be. However, if he is to be taken seriously as a public figure, then so too must his faith. It is upon further inspections here that a stronger comic voice is so clearly needed.

The Pursuit of *Im*perfection

As Burke (1966) writes, “Christianity is built, of course, about the story of a perfect sacrificial king” (p. 39). Does this mean that Tim Tebow must be sacrificed? The man himself, no, but the tragic image of him, yes. Tim Tebow is human after all, and, as such, he will inevitably make a mistake. Despite his eagerness to bear the burden (cross?) of being a role model to thousands or even millions, no person can be held to a standard of perfection. Such a standard inescapably has consequences not only for Tebow but for the larger community as well. Accordingly, I address three byproducts of the sports media’s reliance on the tragic frame.

First, tragedy implies absolutes. Although there are always winners and losers in sports, these are not permanent statuses. Indeed, bad teams can go from “worst to first,” and superstars can quickly become forgotten. More importantly, the principle of perfection, and the absolutism it entails, inevitably constructs a hierarchy that reduces, rather than expands, the possibilities for identification and cooperation. This is precisely what troubles some of those who have looked deeper into the form of Christianity that Tebow endorses. It is not merely an expression of “faith,” but a fundamentalist commitment to a literal interpretation of the Bible complete with the Rapture and Armageddon. Shaped by his father’s Bob Tebow Evangelistic Association, Tebow “promotes a form of belief that makes unwelcome judgments about everyone else’s religion” (Krattenmaker, 2009, ¶ 19). Sportswriter Jeff Pearlman (2010) contends that in spite of his nice-guy persona, Tebow’s mission is dangerous. He writes:

[Tebow] plays football because he wants to spread the word of Jesus Christ. But not merely to spread it. He wants you to accept it and, if you don’t embrace it, he wants you to think again about embracing it . . . If, in the end, you’re still not sold, you will burn in hell. This is not merely Tim Tebow’s opinion—but he knows it, in his soul and heart and mind. Christians who accept Jesus will spend an eternity in bliss. Those who don’t are doomed. (¶ 3)

Pearlman's words may be strong, but they make an important critique of the absolutism that is a product of tragic framing. No one in the sports media who praises Tebow is suggesting that non-believers will go to hell (at least not in print). Nevertheless, the perfection of any human being gives that person an inordinate amount of credibility and influence. In particular, the sports media's willingness to accept "faith" as a universal good without interrogating the commitments underlying that faith allow potentially problematic religious ideologies to remain unexamined. The passive acceptance of Tebow's faith as necessarily positive thus serves as a tacit endorsement of his, and Bob Tebow's, evangelical mission.

Related to this concern is that if Tebow is the embodiment of perfection, then those who do not identify with him risk being marginalized or identified as enemies instead of respected adversaries (Mouffe, 2000). If sport is to retain its agonistic potential, then some identification between rivals must be preserved. For Burke (1966), the construction of a "perfect" hero provokes "the tendency to search out people who, for one reason or another, can be viewed as perfect villains, perfect enemies, and thus, if possible, can become perfect victims of retaliation" (p. 39). This is perhaps unlikely in strict sporting terms. Most fans of the Florida Gators are unlikely to use Tim Tebow as an excuse for embracing violence against fans of other universities. But those who see Tebow as the missionary and enact a conservative Christian faith may very well develop attitudes that justify the demonization of diversity and difference. Indeed, many conservative Christian organizations with whom the Bob Tebow Evangelical Association is allied are guilty of casting feminists, gays and lesbians, and secular humanists as enemies (Crowley, 2006).

Second, Tim Tebow will fail at some point, and it is quite possible that his failure will be spectacular. At the moment, there is almost constant speculation about Tebow's long-term future in the NFL, with some arguing quite vociferously that he will never have sustained success as a professional player. But while athletic failure might be a disappointment, more destructive would be some lapse in character or mission. Already, one reporter has asked Tebow whether or not he is a virgin, a query that provoked significant controversy. Some in the sports media felt the question was unnecessarily personal, but among those who argued it was fair, Jemele Hill (2009) points out that "I've heard a lot of athletes profess to be devout Christians for the cameras—only to see them at the bar later picking up women" (¶ 13). In other words, beneath the surface of the Tebow coverage lies the fear that he will not really be all he has been made out to be, that perhaps our faith in him might be misguided.

It is not unusual, of course, for exalted athletes to fall from grace. In fact, while Tebow continued to receive considerable attention from sports media, two superstar athletes—Tiger Woods and LeBron James—were subjected to widespread public criticism. While the Woods infidelity scandal in late 2009 was a spectacular media story, it is the religiously-inflected language used to describe James that makes for an interesting comparison to Tebow. When James joined the National Basketball Association in 2003 he was anointed the "savior" not only of the moribund Cleveland Cavaliers franchise but an entire league still waiting for an heir apparent to Michael Jordan. Meanwhile, his arrival was announced with a multi-million dollar

Nike advertising campaign that hailed fans as “witnesses.” Add to this that one of his nicknames is “King James,” and it should be clear that the dangers of the tragic frame are also evident in media coverage of LeBron James. Thus, much is revealed by the controversial decision made by James to leave his original, and hometown, team of Cleveland for a free-agent contract with the Miami Heat in 2010. Aired live by ESPN in an excessively promoted television special simply called, “The Decision,” James’s announcement that he would no longer play for the Cavaliers was greeted with anger and resentment. Local fans voiced their sense of abandonment, of feeling as though the one person they could count on had let them down. Especially because the city of Cleveland has struggled with its economy and civic image, James’s decision to leave was widely interpreted as a costly blow to a community that had so little else to celebrate (Simmons, 2010).

The reactions to James’s move to Miami, echoed by many across the country, illustrate the dangers of constructing athletic heroes in the tragic frame. James did not fail as an athlete; rather, he failed as a community savior. I should emphasize, however, that such salvation was only symbolic, a hope contained in the promise of a professional sports championship. Once again, the stakes with Tim Tebow are much higher, for the salvation he promises to deliver is for eternity. Moreover, as an African American athlete, especially one in a sports league commonly stereotyped as repository of black aggression and deviance (Grano, 2007), James was subjected to racially loaded criticisms that explained his actions as symptomatic of narcissistic black culture (Kanalley, 2010). In other words, James was easier to demonize because sports media commonly interpret the “character” of African American athletes with suspicion, whereas white athletes are presumed to have good character until proven otherwise (Grano, 2010). Thus, the backlash against LeBron James serves as a reminder that the community who believes in the mission of Tim Tebow risks much more significant consequences if and when he lets them down.

Third, the divisions produced by heroic language in the tragic frame work in the other direction as well. There is little question that Tim Tebow is resented almost as much as he is beloved. The Internet provides an array of anti-Tebow sites or links, and fans of rival teams have embraced the opportunity to mock and demean Tebow whenever possible. Calling Tebow names, questioning his sexuality, or any other common tactics designed to re-humanize him do not enact Burke’s notion of the comic frame, however. Rather than encourage humility, these responses merely appropriate the language of tragedy by inverting the roles of hero and villain. Thus, rather than the “perfect hero,” Tebow is constructed as the “perfect villain,” a scenario which regrettably encourages additional symbolic violence and division. From this view, it is critical to recognize that sports media coverage of Tim Tebow has contributed to divisive rhetoric and attitudes, not because of the volume of coverage, but because of its reliance on the tragic frame. Criticism of Tebow may indeed be warranted, but not if it facilitates and expands tragic language that is antithetical to democratic health.

Condit (1994) expresses the hope that by reading Kenneth Burke’s dramatic theory, people “would become more self-reflective about the ways in which language

induces us to write tragedies. They might then rewrite their dramas in more sociable ways" (p. 81). That hope depends on the comic corrective, a critical attitude that "teaches humility . . . because in realizing our errors (and correcting them) and in being able to laugh at ourselves we realize that we are not better than everyone else, but just like everyone else in some ways" (Rueckert, 1994, p. 118). The satire of *Saturday Night Live* and the parody of "Tebowie" provide examples of the comic frame, not because they are funny but because they insist on framing Tim Tebow in more humble terms. Creative though these late-night sketches may be, they are exceptions to the rule in sports media coverage that continues to feature a tragic frame. Such framing has constituted Tebow as a heroic figure of (almost) religious significance, a perfect leader, and an embodiment of faithful dedication. Although there is much to admire about Tim Tebow, the tragic framing of his persona requires that critics, fans, and media alike learn to recognize the tendencies of language that, far from bringing us together, only risk driving us further apart.

Notes

- [1] Favre is the recently retired NFL quarterback who spent the majority of his career with the Green Bay Packers. While he was inarguably an elite talent, Favre became something of a mythic figure for his durability and enthusiasm for the game.
- [2] On August 4, 2010, I contacted ESPN directly to ask if *Tim Tebow: The Chosen One* could be purchased. I received an email from "ESPN Viewer Response," stating, "ESPN, Inc. does not release or sell copies of its programming or promos." Nevertheless, the documentary is available on YouTube in five segments, beginning at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9HOUMIghfJA>.

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