

Baseball as a Road to God: Seeing Beyond the Game
By John Sexton
Reviewed by Ronald W. Meister

Before he was president of New York University and dean of its Law School, John Sexton was a student of comparative religion, chair of the Religion Department at St. Francis College in Brooklyn, and debate coach at a Catholic girls' school. Calling on his storehouse of knowledge from those experiences, he has written a book about religion and baseball, and the connections he sees between them.

"Baseball as a Road to God" is adapted from a seminar he has taught for a decade, and takes as its theme that "many of the elements we find in baseball...are elements associated with the religious experience." To illustrate this theme, Sexton collects examples of each "element" from the sacred and the profane in chapters with titles like "Faith," "Doubt," "Conversion," "Blessings" and "Miracles."

The central problem with the book is that the juxtaposition of the two worlds is forced, and Sexton draws no essential lessons from his agglomeration of stories about the Babe and the Book of Ruth, Yogi Berra and the Bhagavad Gita. Jim Gott once pitched to Tim Teufel, but that doesn't transform the game into a Manichaeian dichotomy.

Sexton's approach may work in a seminar, especially for students not steeped in hermeneutics or sabermetrics, but it makes for an ultimately unsatisfying book. Repeating the words hierophany and ineffable 47 times (as recorded in the index) does not make rewarding or fun reading.

Sexton is a fine story-teller, and his examples are, for the most part, interesting in themselves, but he rarely draws meaningful connections between them. Yes, Johnny Podres and Kirk Gibson performed baseball miracles, and the Almighty hurled a plague of hailstones, but unless Sexton is contending that God would have made a good right fielder, the moral is obscure.

It is possible to embrace both the diamond and the cross, but that does not make them related. And some of the comparisons Sexton attempts to draw, notably analogizing his personal apostasy in deserting the Dodgers and becoming a front-running fan of the Yankees to being born again, cannot be taken seriously. (It is no surprise to learn, along the way, that Supreme Court Justice William Brennan, unlike Sexton,

maintained a long-standing contempt for the Yankees, summarizing his reasons in a single word, "Steinbrenner.")

The book is not helped by the high number of errors Sexton puts up on the scoreboard. The Dodgers did not "trounce" the Twins in the 1965 World Series, they prevailed four games to three, only after coming back from a 2-0 deficit. (Sexton here misses a golden opportunity to tell the story of Dodger pitcher Don Drysdale, after being pounded as a Game One substitute for Sandy Koufax, who would not pitch on Yom Kippur, telling manager Walter Alton, "I bet you wish I was Jewish, too.") Ron Swoboda did not make "two spectacular run-saving catches" in the 1969 World Series, that was Tommie Agee (Swoboda made one spectacular catch, and the run scored on a sacrifice fly). The great majority of presidential first pitches came from a field level box seat, not the pitcher's mound.

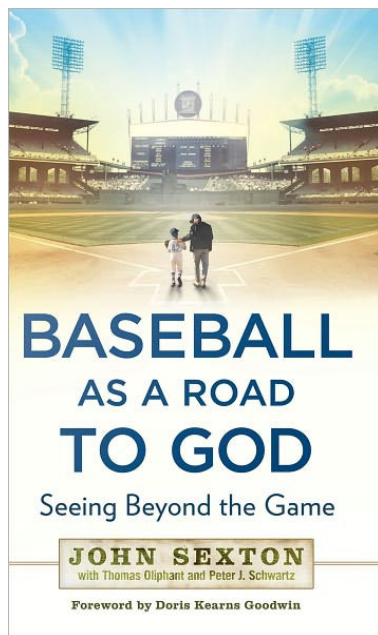
Even in matters of literature, Sexton muffs an easy play, mistakenly writing that the hero of Robert Coover's novel "The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop."—

which Sexton has elsewhere described as "the best book written about baseball by anyone"—was killed by a line drive, when in fact he was fatally beamed.

Sexton also misses an essential element of the game's regional appeal in writing that, before the major leagues expanded, "if you lived in Dixie, you were a Cardinals fan." Well, no, actually, huge numbers of baseball fans in the South after 1947 were Dodgers fans, as anyone who has seen the movie "42" will understand.

When Sexton takes time out from forced comparisons between the King of Kings and the Sultan of Swat, he includes a pleasant chapter on the origins of the seventh-inning stretch and the country's second national anthem, "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" (which, confusingly, is sung by people who are already at the ballgame).

At heart, though, this book is mis-titled. Baseball is not a path to God, and Sexton scarcely tries to prove it is. It is, as columnist Thomas Boswell wrote, "irresponsible, anti-adult, silly, lyric, inexplicable, slightly rebellious and generally disreputable." The infield fly rule may be Talmudic in its complexity, but it is not Maimonides.



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