

Marcus Rashford is keeping Christianity in the British limelight

To find religious activity among the nation's young, look to Afro-Caribbean athletes.

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [January 12, 2022](#) issue



Marcus Rashford playing in the 2018 World Cup in Russia. (Photo by Kirill Venediktov, used via Creative Commons license)

Britain these days is usually cited as a deeply unpromising territory for conventional Christian belief, and especially among the young. It is startling, then, to see just how boldly that faith is displayed by some of the country's most admired young people, and above all in sports.

The prize example is 24-year-old Marcus Rashford, a wildly popular soccer player for Manchester United: according to ESPN, his present transfer value is around \$200 million. His life story fits so well into classic tales of Christian faith that it almost seems too good to be true. His mother, Melanie Maynard, who is of Afro-Caribbean origin, raised a large family through extraordinary hard work and self-denial, which often left her going hungry to feed her children. Like many of her Caribbean-born generation, she is a devout Christian believer.

As Marcus became a superstar in the late 2010s, he repeatedly used his fame and his new wealth to support fundamental causes that spoke directly to his experience, namely, fighting child poverty and arranging meal programs for poor children. Those efforts were redoubled during the 2020 lockdown, when so many children were cut off from free school meals. Some estimate that 4 million children were being fed by charities orchestrated, publicized, or directly funded by Rashford. He has been equally active in child literacy causes and in feeding the homeless.

Throughout, he credits his work to his mother's belief in expressing Christian faith through social action. If not ostentatious in his own personal faith, his interviews make clear that he credits everything to God's guidance.

Rashford is an influential political activist. Whenever Britain's Conservative government tries to cut social programs, especially for children, officials dread being denounced on Rashford's Twitter feed: he has more than 5 million followers. The government has been forced to reverse some particularly Scrooge-like decisions.

Rashford has the reputation of a genuinely good person whose actions spring from faith. At a time when Christianity generally attracts such pathetically limited respect in British media accounts, that is a stunning achievement. The story also has a transnational impact, as Manchester United is a phenomenally popular institution across Black Africa.

If Marcus Rashford has few peers in the philanthropy world, he is almost commonplace among sports personalities in speaking publicly about the Christian faith in which they were raised, which in an African or Caribbean context usually means some form of Pentecostalism. Another soccer star is Raheem Sterling, of Jamaican descent, who speaks of his belief in God and is conspicuous in reading the Bible before training sessions. Official portraits commonly show him gazing upward and pointing to heaven.

A third player commonly listed among the publicly faithful is Bukayo Saka, whose roots are Nigerian and who has made his name playing soccer for Arsenal. (All three played for the England national team.) Saka's faith is Pentecostal, and he attended a well-known megachurch. *Guardian* journalist Julian Coman remarks on the impact such players have had on the visible public culture of soccer: "Signs of the cross on the pitch, and hands raised in prayer before games and after goals, are now commonplace." That theme becomes ever more overt as British teams continue to

recruit players from devout nations in Africa or Latin America.

This sports “revival” constitutes an excellent advertisement for Christianity, and especially among the urban young whose customary interactions with organized religion are minimal. But might it represent anything more? I would not claim too much. Plenty of studies show how immigrants’ levels of religious faith and practice tend to fall off after the first generation or so, as people assimilate to the values of their host society. For someone like Marcus Rashford, his extraordinary activities can largely be seen as a tribute to his parents’ generation, and such faith is difficult to sustain indefinitely.

I offer another British example from the world of popular culture. One stellar figure in that realm is director, actor, writer, and comedian Michaela Coel, who was born in London to Ghanaian parents. Coel’s series *Chewing Gum* offers an often funny version of her millennial upbringing, as she tries to cope with the fervent Pentecostal faith of her mother’s generation. She even joins in her mother’s efforts at street evangelism. But in her more recent semi-autobiographical series *I May Destroy You*, she and her friends show next to no awareness of faith or religious practice, except when they are interacting politely with those parents and elders. Although they can still deploy the Pentecostal-speak as required, they do not see the faith as part of any world that is directly relevant to them as adults. Religion has become a latent presence rather than a lived reality.

But whatever the long-term future might hold, it would be churlish not to celebrate the amazing achievements of the rising generation we now see.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Christians on the pitch.”