

The kingdom of baseball

by [David Heim](#) in the [June 5, 2002](#) issue

There is a brief scene in *The Great Gatsby* in which narrator Nick Carraway is introduced to the man who fixed the 1919 World Series. Nick is stunned by the notion. "It never occurred to me that one man could play with the faith of fifty million people--with the single-mindedness of a burglar blowing a safe."

The faith to which Nick refers, and to which Christopher H. Evans and William R. Herzog allude in their title, is that baseball is somehow set apart from the self-interest and greed that taint the rest of society. Evans and Herzog, the editors and principal authors of this collection, contend that faith in baseball goes even deeper: baseball is tied to the promise of America. It is a symbol of the "national virtues of freedom, justice and equality." In short, baseball is an element of American civil religion.

That baseball occupies such a role in American life is partly the result of some early 20th-century propaganda, as the authors point out. Boosters of the game stressed its allegedly American virtues. Baseball, exulted sporting goods magnate Albert Spalding, "is the exponent of American courage, confidence, combativeness, dash, discipline, determination . . ." Spalding also helped spread the sport's powerful creation myth--that it was invented by Civil War General Abner Doubleday as a boy in Cooperstown, New York, in 1839. The historical evidence for this account is slight, but the story neatly embeds the game in an aura of patriotism and small-town life.

Protestant leaders of the social gospel era such as Shailer Matthews and Washington Gladden were also keen on the values of baseball. They believed that the sport both demonstrated the importance of teamwork and called forth individual discipline and determination. At a time when Protestants looked to build the kingdom of God in America, baseball promised to be an outpost of the kingdom.

Having established the moral promise of baseball, at least as portrayed in the rhetoric of its backers, Evans, Herzog and colleagues have little trouble showing how that promise has been betrayed. Like the "almost chosen" nation, baseball has muffed its divine mission, succumbing to racism, sexism, capitalist exploitation of

workers, and commercial interests.

Racial prejudice has been perhaps the major serpent in the baseball garden. Black ballplayers were kept out of the major leagues until Branch Rickey of the Brooklyn Dodgers hired Jackie Robinson in 1946. Even after the Robinson era, many teams were slow to integrate, and did so only as they realized they needed black ballplayers to stay competitive. Only recently have blacks been admitted to the top managerial and executive posts in the major leagues.

Evans and Herzog's chastened celebration of baseball is a bit heavy on the moralizing. Their zeal in calling baseball to repent of its sins ends up reasserting (as all jeremiads do) the significance of its divine calling. This approach leads the writers at times to exaggerate the moral possibilities of the game.

For example, Eleanor J. Stebner and Tracy J. Trothen, in writing about how women athletes have been excluded from the sport or treated as a sideshow, lament that baseball has not embodied a "radically inclusive community" that would make no invidious distinctions between genders or even levels of talent, and would celebrate the process of play, not the outcome. Their ideal game, it appears, would be one played at a Sunday school picnic, where everyone gets to play and no one keeps score. Those who relish the hard-fought rivalries between the game's best players are, apparently, lost in patriarchal darkness.

The authors are so focused on the social-ethical ideals that have been or might be ascribed to baseball that they pay scant attention to religion in the sense of sacramental experience--the experience of awe and joy that occurs on and off the field. Surely, if a religious dimension can be claimed for baseball, it is primarily because the game offers a unique form of play, a chance to participate in a meaning and order beyond ourselves which satisfies mind, body and soul. The kingdom of baseball, after all, is a gift as well as a task.