

What is it about Tim Tebow's actions?

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In Theory: What is it about Tim Tebow's actions?

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Question:

Denver Broncos quarterback Tim Tebow is proving to be a divisive figure on the field of play, but it's not just his skills that are attracting controversy. Tebow, a devout Christian who wrote Biblical references in his eye black while at college and mentions Jesus in every interview with the media, has found himself at the center of a debate about religion and sports.

Compared to other NFL stars' controversies, such as Michael Vick's conviction for dog-fighting or Adam Jones' various nightclub incidents, one might think that Tebow's public displays of faith would come as a breath of fresh air. The 24-year-old is humble, wholesome, does charitable work to help orphanages in the Philippines, advocates abstinence and is gracious in victory. Tebow frequently prays both on the field and sidelines before and during plays and it's this public display of faith that has polarized fans and media alike. His now-famous bended-knee pose is copied by people who submit photos of themselves to tebowing.com, and hundreds of Broncos fans have bought replicas of his #15 jersey and replaced "Tebow" on the back with "Jesus".

Some claim the controversy is due to the so-called liberal media, others to football fans' negative reactions to acts of faith. Former St. Louis Rams' quarterback Kurt Warner, another devout Christian who was criticized for thanking Jesus after winning Super Bowl XXXIV, told the Arizona Republic, "I'd tell him, 'Put down the boldness in regards to the words, and keep living the way you're living. Let your teammates do the talking for you. Let them cheer on your testimony.'" Former Broncos player Jake Plummer said in a radio interview, "I think that when he accepts the fact that we know that he loves Jesus Christ, then I think I'll like him a little better ... I just would rather not have to hear that every single time he takes a good snap or makes a good handoff."

What is it about Tebow that makes him a divisive figure? Is his public praying really that big a deal?

Answer:

I must confess that I don't actively follow football, so I am glad that this week's question is not a commentary about the game, or the skill of Tim Tebow of the Denver Broncos. What it does ask is whether a sports figure should make a public show of his Christian faith during games and in interviews with the media. There is certainly no law that is being violated by Tebow's activities. He has the right to free speech about his beliefs. However, the question is not whether he can express his opinions, but whether the extreme number of his religious monologues is something that is either a necessary or a positive demonstration of his faith.

Even another Christian football player has suggested that Tebow should tone down his religious speech and let his life, rather than his words, be a reflection of his beliefs. And I agree. When we live our values, rather than talking about them, people can see how important they are to us.

Making a big show of our beliefs, particularly on nationwide television, may well be interpreted as the height of hubris — calling attention to ourselves, rather than to the religion we profess.

What I would suggest that all of us do is to put our faith into action. The value of reaching out with compassion to those in need is a much more valuable way of expressing what we believe than what we say about it. Particularly during this season of the year, those of many faith traditions should let their beliefs be converted into acts of charity and justice, not just self-aggrandizing speech.

I believe that is the message of Christmas, Hanukkah, Solstice, and other winter holidays. May we find the opportunity to practice our deeply-felt religious beliefs in the days and weeks ahead. Happy holidays to all!

The Rev. Dr. Betty Stapleford
Unitarian Universalist Church of the Verdugo Hills
La Crescenta

When the angels appeared to the shepherds after the birth of Jesus Christ, they sang “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men....” (Luke 2:14). But often we forget that they completed that sentence with a qualification: “...with whom he is pleased.” Jesus himself said: “Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matthew 10:34).

So we shouldn't be surprised that Jesus Christ is what makes Tim Tebow a divisive figure. I believe it's valid in our culture to ask if Tebow's public prayer is a big deal. It's just sad that we even have to ask it. With the predominance of other celebrities' very public scandals involving immorality, drug and alcohol abuse and crime, it's an

indictment against our culture that so many think that prayer in public is unacceptable. So Tebow may be a little over the top. Football players are known for great exuberance after they win the Superbowl. Understand that Jesus Christ has done more for Tim Tebow than any Superbowl win ever could. Give the guy a break.

People divide over Jesus Christ today, and ultimately Jesus Christ himself will gather all the nations before himself and he will divide them into two groups: those who loved him unashamedly and served him during their lives, and those who didn't. Those who loved Jesus Christ will be welcomed into his eternal kingdom. Those who didn't will be eternally cast out. Then everybody will know the real eternal value of public opinion: zero.

Pastor Jon Barta
Valley Baptist Church
Burbank

Um, did you see the Broncos game last Sunday? With 2:08 left in the game, they were down 10-0. A touchdown and then a 59-yard field goal with three seconds to go put them into overtime, then another long field goal won it for them — putting their record at 7-1 since Tebow took over as quarterback.

So it turns out Jesus really does play favorites. Who knew? I'm going to start dropping to one knee every time someone puts a twenty in the offering plate; maybe it will spark a miraculous comeback for the church budget.

Kidding, of course (except about the twenties, bring those on in). Honestly, I'm as turned off as the next guy by Tebow's "give-the-glory-to-Jesus-Christ" thing. Jesus himself might be turned off by it, actually; he warned his followers to "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them ... but whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret" (Matthew 6:1, 6).

But even more honestly, I have to admit that if I found out there was a winning quarterback who meditated in the locker room before every game — or unrolled his prayer rug, or made an incense offering, or told the press that he connects with the Tao of the universe while he plays — I would think it was cool. I have to get past my prejudice against loud evangelical expressions of faith, and say, after a deep breath, "Hey, all faith is good."

At least Tebow's got some — unlike the 48% of Americans who profess no faith at all.

But wait! Think about this: Last Sunday, it was really place kicker Matt Prater who won the game for the Broncos, making the longest field goal of his career to tie it, and another

long one in overtime, as the crowds went wild. Maybe it's not Tebow who's the Mile-High Messiah; maybe Jesus truly loves Matt Prater the best.

I guess we'll see this Sunday, when the Broncos host the 10-3 New England Patriots. They'll need all the prayer they can get.

The Rev. Amy Pringle
St. George's Episcopal Church
La Cañada Flintridge

There is something about some evangelical Christians that makes them feel the need to mention their Lord and Savior at every possible moment. That need probably comes from something Jesus is reported to have said in one of the Gospels. Jesus says that whoever is ashamed of him, then so will Jesus be ashamed of that person when said person is standing before God Almighty after this earthly life is over.

First of all, does anybody think that there is a person alive in the United States today who has never heard of Jesus? I don't. I would venture to say that everybody in America has heard of Jesus. Not everybody has the same opinion of Jesus, but I'm sure everybody has heard of him.

Personally, I'm not sure that Tim Tebow's mention of Jesus at every opportunity is such a big deal — but I find it irritating as hell. I have to say that I am pleased that there are such players as Jake Plummer who imply that it would be better if Tebow showed his faith by living it, rather than by always saying it.

What I would really like to see sometime is a Muslim sports reporter respond to Tebow's Jesus talk with something like this: “Thanks, Tim — and there is no God but Allah. Back to you guys in the booth.”

The Rev. Skip Lindeman
La Cañada Congregational Church
La Cañada Flintridge

Everyone has the right to proclaim their faith, or lack of faith, whenever and wherever they choose. Tim Tebow has gotten a great deal of attention because of his professions of faith on the field. I respect the opinions of his former teammates and players like Jake Plummer and Kurt Warner.

They both advise Tebow to tone down his Christian rhetoric on the field. I think they may have good points when they say Tebow may not create the results he seeks by his actions.

They point out two negative impressions related to Tebow's profession of faith during games. One impression is that he is asking his God to bless his one side of the competition and spite the other players on the opposing side. The other issue some people might take is with the apparent braggadocio of saying everyone should look at how much faith I have. I am superior to others and I am going to constantly remind everyone of my superior faith.

While I can see the point in these criticisms, I support his freedom to do what he wants. I look forward to the day when a professional ballplayer publicly professes atheist ideas during a game.

Steven Gibson
South Pasadena Atheist Meetup
Altadena

In Dickens' classic, "A Christmas Carol," a condemned spirit appears to Ebenezer Scrooge to warn him of several forthcoming angelic visitations. It turns out that the spirit is none other than his deceased business partner, Jacob Marley. Scrooge tries to impugn his sentence with an encouragement, "you were always a good man of business, Jacob." To which the agonizing apparition bellows, "Business! Mankind was my business!" Apparently money had come first in the man's earthly life, as it does with many, but many make additional things first, like the issue at hand — football.

It's a wonder that such commotion is made over godly athletes thanking their maker for success. Don't godly people thank him at every meal? Perhaps this only betrays the spiritual dearth of gridiron fans. God doesn't throw Tebow's football for him, nor does he guide its trajectory, but God is the creator of his arm, natural abilities, and his very life.

Why shouldn't he give thanks where it's due? Pastors encourage believers to "walk the walk," not just "talk the talk," but this isn't to exclude either. If everyone thought Tebow was a real stand-up guy, but they never saw him pray or speak of Jesus, how would they know the most important thing in his life that makes him what he is? Tebow has made mankind his business.

Typical pro footballers play three to four years before retirement. What then, sneaker endorsements for more money? How significant. In the Old Testament, a naturally beautiful and godly woman is cast into a pagan venue where she must choose to remain silent and be married to a king who persecutes her people, or risk scorn and join them by revealing her allegiance to the biblical God. Her uncle asks her, "who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14 NIV). She Tebowed. The story has a merry ending.

Tebow is football royalty. He has come to the NFL for such a time as this, knowing that one day, “we will all stand before God's judgment” and “every knee will bow” (Romans 14:10-11).

The Rev. Bryan Griem
Montrose Community Church
Montrose

This question is my introduction to Tebow and to the “big deal” attention paid to him.

The Worldwide Religious News may be a bit over the top in calling the Tebow affair a “phenomenon unrivaled in sports history,” but he has set out to get attention and has succeeded.

Perhaps that is what makes him divisive.

As a person with my own strongly-held beliefs and not shy about publically demonstrating them, it isn't that big a deal to me. It is religion and state that I don't like mixed, and the NFL is not part of the state yet.

He doesn't seem to be getting any grief from management because of his actions in the workplace — we should all have such a good labor contract. The website www.NFLShop.com now sells a Jesus jersey for \$94.99, also benefiting.

But if I actually followed football, it would detract from the game and be a big-deal irritant to me, and that is the verdict of all the football-loving friends I checked with.

I can relate to this complaint because my baseball-loving spouse and I are put off big-time by the MLB tendency to focus on distracting, extraneous matters, often with religious and nationalist overtones. A prime example is the now de rigeur singing of “God Bless America” during the 7th-inning stretch.

Many star athletes are eccentric and/or attention-seeking.

Colorful players are part of the entertainment of sports, and that's fine with me, as long as they don't interfere with the game, or with watching it.

Maybe instead of Tebowing, he could put “Love Jesus” on his helmet and witness quietly throughout the game without soaking up camera time.

Then maybe other players would start expressing themselves — “Be Tolerant,” “Feed

Hungry,” “Stop War,” “Support Education.” Maybe then I'd watch football.

Roberta Medford

Atheist

Montrose

I fail to understand how praying in public makes someone a “divisive” figure. After all, Tim Tebow is not forcing any of his teammates or fans to join him in prayer. Without inconveniencing anyone else, he is simply exercising his constitutional right to practice religion as he sees fit. I don't see how Tebow's actions are any different than those of an athlete who thanks his wife, coach, teammates, or even psychiatrist in helping him succeed.

It seems to me that this entire controversy was hatched by those who are generally uncomfortable with religion, and who sensed another opportunity to attack those who are religious believers. Frankly, I feel that we should encourage, not discourage, players to publicly express their faith, if they are so inclined.

The world of professional sports is unfortunately often dominated by the “bad boys” who use vile language, display despicable behavior, and are found committing immoral (and sometimes illegal) acts off the field. In contrast to this depressing trend, Tim Tebow is indeed a breath of fresh air.

From everything I have seen, Tebow is humble, gracious, thankful and very talented.

This is the kind of person our children should be emulating, and this is precisely the kind of behavior that is so sorely missed in pro sports. So I say hooray for Tim Tebow! In this Broncos quarterback, we finally have a sports figure who is outstanding in both play and morality.

Rabbi Simcha Backman

Chabad Jewish Center

Glendale

From what I have read in the papers and seen on television, Tim Tebow is what he professes to be — a good Christian.

Does this make him unique in the NFL? I'm sure there are other NFL players who are good Christians and exemplify their faith. So why does Tim Tebow get so much publicity, both good and bad? I think there are at least seven reasons for this.

First, Tebow had a very successful college career in which he won the Heisman Trophy and a national championship.

This put him into the national spotlight.

Second, Tebow was public about his religious beliefs, including wearing biblical verses on his eye black in college. The latter likely caused the NCAA to implement a rule prohibiting messages on eye black.

Third, for all of his athletic abilities, he does not have good passing mechanics for an NFL quarterback.

Fourth, in a controversial selection, the Denver Broncos made him a first-round draft pick, which was a surprise to many.

Fifth, to the credit of Tebow and his teammates, the Broncos are 7-1 since Tebow became the starting quarterback.

Sixth, there is a large group of Christians that follow Tebow. His jersey was one of the top selling jerseys in the NFL even before he started as quarterback.

Seventh, the media has trouble handling religious individuals, let alone religious athletes, who are public about their religious beliefs.

Putting this all altogether and more, you have the Tebow phenomenon. It makes an interesting NFL storyline and baffles sports commentators, such as ESPN's Colin Cowherd. It is wonderful to see a great young man have success, and I hope it will last.

Even so, I'm troubled in general about individual athletes who over-publicize their religious beliefs.

Does one need to take a knee in prayer or signal heavenward every time a touchdown or a good play is made, especially in front of 70,000 fans and national TV?

I actually think that such actions can trivialize one's religious beliefs and subject them to scrutiny. We shouldn't hide our religious beliefs, but we shouldn't trivialize them, either.

Rick Callister
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
La Cañada

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