AN ODE TO THE ZEN MASTER: PHIL JACKSON’S SPIRITUAL RHETORIC AS AN APPROACH TO CULTIVATE TRANSCENDENT TEAM BUILDING

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the use of religion in a typically secular space through the examination of former NBA head coach Phil Jackson and his teams with the Chicago Bulls and Los Angeles Lakers. Jackson, often characterized as the ‘Zen Master,’ is well known for the use of unorthodox coaching methods, however, there has been no deep exploration of what he does, what its impact is on the integrity of each religion he draws from, and how his work is reflective of a broader trend in American culture of spirituality entering secular spaces. This thesis is based on an analysis of Jackson’s self-described religious mixing in his book, Sacred Hoops, and extensive research online of articles written and accounts of Jackson’s coaching from the perspective of players, reporters, executives, etc. This thesis concludes that Jackson creates a unique religious community among each team through transcendent team building: the act of building a religious community that draws on existing religious concepts and practices and applying them to a specific group of people with the goal of turning a typically secular activity such as basketball into a spiritual experience.
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The mysterious forces that seem to connect us all

Thank you.
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INTRODUCTION

Though voted as one of the top ten coaches in NBA history,¹ Phil Jackson is not always given his due credit as the leader of eleven NBA championship teams. His critics might point to the fact that six of his teams included Michael Jordan, arguably the greatest player of all time. Or that he had the combination of Shaquille O’Neal and Kobe Bryant for three more championships. Or that he had Kobe Bryant for his last two. These are worthy arguments, as these are some of the greatest players to ever set foot on a basketball court. However, these critiques focus too much on the talents and abilities of individual players and do not give sufficient attention to the importance of team cohesion, group ability, and the connection between all players on a team. Superstar players are almost always present on championship teams, but simply having or accumulating star players does not guarantee a team its ultimate goal of winning a championship. Role players, lucky moments, coaches, and intangibles all play crucial roles on successful teams. Phil Jackson is a master at getting the most out of his teams. He knows how to focus each team member on one common goal and connect his players on a deep level. This is where Jackson’s value is realized on his championship teams. He takes a few great players, and he makes great teams.

Observers do not sufficiently recognize this aspect of Jackson’s coaching ability and the impact that it has on his players. Jackson takes the goal that every NBA player dreams of (winning a championship) and turns that goal into something longer lasting and not necessarily all about winning a championship. This is to say that there is much more to playing basketball than playing basketball, and Jackson works to make his players realize this by coaching basketball with an eye toward the spiritual aspect of the game. Jackson’s unorthodox coaching

style involves the incorporation of several different religious traditions. As Jackson states in *Sacred Hoops*: “The day I took over the Bulls, I vowed to create an environment based on the principles of selflessness and compassion I’d learned as a Christian in my parents’ home; sitting on a cushion practicing Zen; and studying the teachings of the Lakota Sioux.”  

Each of these has had a profound impact on Jackson’s life and career, and contribute greatly to the coaching style that has made Jackson so successful. These three influences (Christianity, Zen Buddhism, and the Lakota Sioux), according to Jackson, have shaped his worldview, purpose in life, and the way in which he perceives the game of basketball. Jackson occasionally cites Taoism as another influence in his life and coaching³, but he does not identify it as one of the main pillars of his coaching style. This eccentric coaching style is often boiled down to his nickname, the ‘Zen Master.’ This nickname acknowledges that there is some level of spiritual or religious aspect to the work that Jackson does, but it does not go any deeper than that. Sometimes it is used in a joking manner, or in a way that discredits his techniques. These kinds of references poke fun at Jackson’s mysterious and spiritual approach, suggesting that religion is a humorous presence in professional athletics.

As I mentioned above, Jackson is trying to make the game of basketball more than simply a game but instead a shared experience between people. I will argue that Phil Jackson’s blending of religious traditions explicitly uses religious language and practices to create an environment that cultivates transcendent team building. Transcendent team building is the act of building a religious community that draws on existing religious concepts and practices and applying them to a specific group of people with the goal of turning a typically secular activity such as

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³ Ibid., 136.
basketball into a spiritual experience. Jackson does this by essentially creating a religious community within his teams. These are not religious communities where the players are required to follow certain rituals or believe in a specific god, they simply have a spiritual base. The word spirituality is an important one throughout this thesis, so I would like to define it here. When I use the word spirituality I am describing the blending of different religious influences, but staying outside of traditional religious institutions and communities. Spirituality comes through action, rather than doctrine or statements of faith. This allows for a spirituality that is unique to each person, their influences, and flexibility in how they incorporate these influences in their life. The purpose of this thesis is to explore what Jackson manages to accomplish by employing and mixing different religious traditions in his coaching, what this strategy ultimately means for his players, and what the larger implications are for the integrity of the religious traditions he draws from. I will ultimately defend Jackson, as he is an example of a broader religious and spiritual movement in the United States that needs to be taken seriously because it is widespread, and effective at winning games and creating a professional basketball experience that is beyond just playing basketball.

I. Literature Review

The literature in this field of study focuses on the development and uses of spirituality. Certain authors criticize modern spirituality in the United States, while others praise it, or simply analyze it. However, very few focus on specific figures that are developing unique forms of spirituality, especially figures with such a broad following as Phil Jackson. I have relied on several academic sources in order to bring a broad and serious discussion to Jackson’s mixing of religions, as well as Jackson’s incorporation of religion into a secular environment. Jackson does
not address the broader implications of what he is doing in his books, and he is not necessarily aware of them. He does recognize when he changes certain aspects of the religions he borrows from, but he never enters in a conversation about what his actions mean for the integrity of each religion. He also does not discuss the broader phenomenon of religion in a secular space. There have been several books that helped to put Jackson’s worked in an academic context.

The first is *Mindful America* by Jeff Wilson, a book that initiated my interest in further studying the role that Jackson plays in the greater phenomenon of mindfulness in the United States. In this book Wilson gives countless examples of how Buddhist meditation has been appropriated in American culture and how mindfulness has become a legitimate moneymaking business.\(^4\) He explains to his readers that Buddhism has always moved into new cultures through people looking for ways that Buddhism will help alleviate the problems unique to their culture.\(^5\)

The adoption of Buddhism and Buddhist practices is alive and well in the United States, and Phil Jackson is a notable example of this phenomenon.\(^6\) Though this thesis is not focusing directly on the larger phenomenon of mindfulness in the United States, it does focus on the appropriation of religions for use in a context different from their origin. Wilson’s book allows my thesis to enter into a broader conversation that is taking place about the appropriation of Buddhist meditation and its use in American culture.

*Creative Spirituality* by Robert Wuthnow is one book that focuses on how individual artists see their work as a form of spiritual practice, although Wuthnow focuses on figures with much smaller followings than Jackson and with much less commercial appeal. Wuthnow tells the

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\(^5\) Ibid., 3.

\(^6\) Ibid., 39.
stories of many artists who want to represent the sacred aspects of their work in their art, and in
doing so he shows how they are discovering new methods of practicing spirituality.\(^7\) While some
artists work in their established religious traditions, others are exploring different ways to
embrace a sense of spirituality.\(^8\) As more and more Americans search for their unique spirituality
through many different faiths, it is important to look at how artists are pushing this boundary.
Wuthnow tells us that nonconformity has been very important in the history of American religion
and therefore it is crucial to study this continued nonconformity.\(^9\) In a non-traditional sense, Phil
Jackson is an artist as well. He has shown over twenty years of coaching that he is one of the best
at his craft. His artistic abilities are represented through his coaching techniques and the way his
players execute on the floor. This thesis will be entering into this conversation of non-conformity
in religion and how Jackson is expressing his own unique form of religion.

*Selling Spirituality* by Jeremy Carrette and Richard King does not provide a direct
critique of Jackson, but it is critical of the religious mixing that has become prominent in modern
spirituality. Carrette and King argue that spirituality has become another product to be sold on
the market.\(^{10}\) The authors make the point that the ambiguity surrounding the word “spirituality”
allows it to be morphed and used to benefit whoever wants to sell it.\(^{11}\) Additionally, they contend
that a worrying aspect of modern spiritualities is that they simply accommodate accepted


\(^8\) Ibid., 2.

\(^9\) Ibid., 9.


\(^{11}\) Ibid., 15.
conventions and do little to challenge the accepted way of life.\textsuperscript{12} The authors believe that branding things as ‘spiritual’ allows individuals and corporations to not only remove the historical and authentic aspects from religion, but also to distance themselves from the worldviews of the religion, clearing the way for their ‘spiritual ideas’ to be sold on a large scale.\textsuperscript{13} Looking at Phil Jackson’s mixture of religious influences through the lens of this book has provided insight into how Jackson works with the concept of spirituality and morphs it to his benefit. Carrette and King have helped to place Phil Jackson’s teachings and published books into a larger conversation about the effects of incorporating several different religious traditions into one’s own spirituality.

\textit{Consuming Religion} by Vincent Miller also can be looked at as an indirect critique of Jackson’s religious syncretism. Miller takes issue with people taking religious symbols or teachings out of their original context because he believes this takes away from the values of the original religious institutions.\textsuperscript{14} He argues that the religious and cultural traditions of an institution (specifically Christianity) have been debated and refined for centuries, and therefore should not be taken out of the environment they were born in.\textsuperscript{15} Additionally, he does not like the idea that things described as ‘spiritual’ can come with few ideological or theological requirements and people can enjoy the easier and beneficial aspects of religion without having to embrace the more rigid and difficult aspects.\textsuperscript{16} I will be using Jackson as an example to enter in a

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\textsuperscript{12} Carrette and King, \textit{Selling Spirituality}, 5.
\textsuperscript{13} Carrette and King, \textit{Selling Spirituality}, 15.
\textsuperscript{14} Vincent Miller, \textit{Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture} (New York: Continuum, 2003), 73.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 77.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 77.
\end{footnotesize}
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conversation with Miller and ultimately defend the work that Jackson does, despite Miller’s objections.

II. Methodology

My understanding of Jackson’s coaching strategies largely comes from his book *Sacred Hoops*, although I read parts of his other books *Maverick* and *Eleven Rings* to gain an understanding of his beliefs and coaching over a broader period of time. Jackson’s books were used as sources for the expression of his spiritual and religious beliefs. In these books I looked for two things: how different religious traditions have influenced Jackson’s beliefs (expressions of his own beliefs) and how he incorporated and presented these beliefs in his coaching techniques (packaging and selling his beliefs). In his books Jackson mentions what his influences are, and so I followed these influences and read *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, as well as *Being Lakota*, a book on Lakota Sioux culture. These provided a comparison between what Jackson writes and preaches, and what the traditional teachings and beliefs are of these different religious traditions. They were also a point of comparison for analyzing how Jackson interpreted what he learned, and determining whether he changed any of the teachings to fit his needs. It was interesting to identify if he modified any of his religious beliefs when presenting them to his teams. Finally, I looked for examples of when several of Jackson’s religious influences mixed together in his coaching to create spirituality unique to Jackson. My goal was to analyze the blending of these traditions and the effect it has had on the meaning and evolution of spirituality in America today.

When looking at articles and interviews online in the ESPN and Sports Illustrated archives, I looked for specific examples given by players, coaches, or reporters on how Jackson
coached his teams and incorporated his spiritual practices. I looked for specific stories of exactly how Jackson presented these practices to them, and how he went about having them actually practice them. I discovered what the players’ reactions were to these kinds of methods, both at the time of their presentation, as well as after the fact. Testimonials from Jackson’s former players were helpful in forming a rounded opinion of what Jackson was trying to do by incorporating different religions in his coaching.

The book *Mindgames* by Roland Lazenby was a helpful secondary source in this project when trying to fill in gaps about Jackson’s life that he does not touch on in his books. It is a biography of Jackson’s career and provided another angle into Jackson’s life, as well as illuminated additional influences on his spirituality.

I looked to books such as *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* and *Creative Spirituality* to put Jackson’s blending in context. Both of these books are studies done on current phenomenon that Jackson could be considered of exemplifying. Jackson is a creative artist, working to show his players that there is an intrinsic enjoyment and purpose, or flow, in the game of basketball that can connect them all.

**III. Background on Phil Jackson**

In the following pages I provide a brief description of Jackson’s spiritual background to explain how he has been shaped and how his religious and spiritual views have formed. The most formative influence in Jackson’s life was his Pentecostal upbringing. Both of his parents were ministers who made sure Jackson strictly followed their faith during his youth: “My mother truly believed that an idle mind was the devil’s playground. She gave me hundreds of quotations from the King James Bible to memorize, to keep me armed and ready for the trials and
There were no alternative faiths in Jackson’s youth, as Jackson’s mother was an extremely passionate Christian and expected a great deal from her children. Jackson’s father was also “a man of God, pure and simple” and “did everything by the Book, and expected [Jackson] and his brothers, Charles and Joe, to do the same.” Though Jackson would later have his doubts, his parents formed his theological beliefs and instilled in him in some sense that there is a greater purpose and connection between humans.

The experience in his youth that made Jackson doubt his parents’ beliefs was his inability to “experience the presence of the Holy Spirit physically” and speak in tongues. Jackson tried to achieve this, but was never able to. Reflecting on this experience years later after suffering a back injury during his playing days, Jackson realized that his failure to speak in tongues had a profound effect that he had not entirely been aware of. During his recovery he started paying attention to his thoughts: “To entertain myself, I began observing my thoughts and trying to figure out what made my mind click. What I discovered was a mountain of guilt.” He felt this guilt because although “[he] still occasionally went to church, [he] felt guilty about distancing [him]self from [his] parents and [his] spiritual heritage.” Though Jackson’s experience as a child made him skeptical about certain aspects of Christianity, there were two aspects that stuck with him: love and compassion. These two aspects are pillars of his own beliefs as he believes

17 Jackson and Delehanty, Sacred Hoops, 27.
18 Jackson and Delehanty, Sacred Hoops, 28.
19 Ibid., 28.
20 Ibid., 29.
21 Ibid., 36.
them to be crucial influences that connect human beings. It is also evident that they are foundational aspects of his coaching.

Jackson’s experience of struggling to connect with Christianity as a young man is ultimately what led to Zen Buddhism really resonating with Jackson. Jackson’s brother, Joe, introduced him to Zen Buddhism and the concept of a clear and present mind. This really struck Jackson because of his idea of what a mind should be like from his Pentecostal upbringing. Jackson explains: “But the Zen idea of a polluted mind is quite different from the traditional Christian perspective, which dictates that ‘impure’ thoughts be rooted out and eliminated. What polluted the mind in the Buddhist view is our desire to get life to conform to our peculiar notion of how things should be, as opposed to how they really are.”22 The practice of Zen allowed Jackson to quiet his mind from the overthinking and clutter that his Christian teachings had imparted in him. A few years later, Jackson encountered the book *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind* by Shunryu Suzuki and this began his serious practice of Zen Buddhism. Jackson’s practice of Zen Buddhism merged over time with the prior foundation of Christianity to form a new form of religion for Jackson, which he calls Zen Christianity.23 Though he has no formal description for this, it is based on his beliefs in concepts from both traditions that complement one another and allow him to connect best with the world and with himself. Jackson is intrigued by the intersection of Zen and Christianity in the concept of compassion.24 Loving and having an open heart are important aspects of Jackson’s faith.


23 Ibid., 51.

24 Ibid., 51.
Jackson’s third major influence is the Lakota Sioux tribe, a group he worked closely with when teaching basketball camps at the Pine Ridge Reservation. Jackson’s fascination with Native American culture began as a young boy living in Montana where he went to school with Native American children. He would check out countless books on Native American culture and read all about it. This fascination continued throughout his teenage years and into his adult life. He conducted many basketball community outreach events while a student at the University of North Dakota and later as a professional basketball player to connect the Native American community with other people in the community. Jackson learned a great deal about Sioux culture and “its proud warrior heritage” working at these camps. From them he began to see “the interconnectedness of all life” and the sacredness in all things. It is from this that Jackson draws when trying to teach his players about the sacredness of their quest to win a championship, as well as the importance of feeling the connection to the people and the environment around them. As Jackson describes: “The Lakota didn’t perceive of the self as a separate entity, isolated from the rest of the universe. The stones they carved into arrowheads, the buffalo they hunted, the Crow warriors they battled, were all seen as reflections of themselves.” This concept of the oneness of all things is one that Jackson greatly emphasizes in his coaching. Jackson also learns of the concept of humility from the Lakota Sioux, as they believe that if glory is experienced by any of them then they are “obligated to give away [their] most prized possessions to relatives,

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26 Ibid., 49.


28 Ibid., 109.
friends, the poor, and the aged.” During his coaching, Jackson expects humility from his best players and he wants them to show compassion to each of the other players on the team. These three religious traditions form the pillar of spirituality that Jackson draws on when coaching his teams.

CHAPTER I:

PRAGMATISM

There are a variety of factors that contribute to team success. These factors range from developing good relationships between players, to perfecting basketball mechanics, establishing effective routines and habits, and working on communication. Countless strategies can be used to work on these skills, each with their own emphases. Jackson chooses to teach many of these skills by drawing on his own spiritual influences. While many spiritual traditions overlap in their teaching, each has its own strengths and weaknesses, lending themselves to different situations and contexts. Through years of coaching experience, Jackson has developed a skill of implementing different spiritual traditions where it is useful, and has capitalized on this ability. Jackson’s use of several spiritual traditions in his coaching makes him unique in the world of professional coaching. This coaching style helps him to be dynamic and creative, but most importantly, it allows him to connect with his players. Drawing from different spiritualities and worldviews allows Jackson to be nimble and pragmatic with his faiths. This is extremely useful when relating to his players, as he can use the tradition most appropriate to a situation.

Jackson does not force his spiritual views on his players. He recognizes that each of them has their own beliefs, and he does not want to tell them what to believe. However, he does want his players to think about the perspectives they hold and how these perspectives inform the situations they find themselves in. One way in which Jackson does this is by facilitating

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29 Jackson and Delehanty, Sacred Hoops, 109.
discussion about ethics and belief amongst his players. He does this not only to expand their minds, but also to forge a deeper connection between them. For example, during training camp at the beginning of a season, Jackson gives his players a copy of a book that is a present day analysis of the Ten Commandments.\textsuperscript{30} He asks his players to read parts of the book during practice sessions in order to “stimulate group discussion”\textsuperscript{31} because he believes that a connection between players “will be deeper and last longer if it’s built on a foundation of genuine exchange.”\textsuperscript{32} Here Jackson uses spiritual and ethical content to create an environment where players can share ideas and build their relationships in a different way than they otherwise would. While some players, in smaller groups, might have discussions like this on their own, it is unlikely that the entire team would engage in this kind of dialogue. Jackson understands the importance of developing deep connections between players, and while discussions might not work for everyone, it works for some. This kind of exercise helps develop common ground in terms of values on which players can relate to each other. It also helps to get players out of their comfort zones, as they likely have not participated in discussion like this before in their basketball careers. Expanding his players’ minds and giving them space to grow and develop are important parts of Jackson’s job, and creating experiences like this helps him to do that. The Ten Commandments obviously have a Christian connotation, but Jackson is not forcing the religion on them whatsoever. He does not give them photocopied pages from the Bible, he gives them a modern-day interpretation of the Commandments. No other presence of Christianity exists in this discussion. He does not lead the team in prayer or preach to them. Only the ethical and spiritual aspects guide the discussion. However, Jackson does choose to use Christianity in this context as

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{30} Jackson and Delehanty, \textit{Sacred Hoops}, 124.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 124.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 124.
\end{itemize}
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a tool to connect with players. The players have a familiarity with Christianity that they likely do not have with the other spiritual traditions Jackson draws from. Most of his players, having grown up in the United States, have been exposed to Christian and Western thought, giving them a framework for how to discuss ethics during the sessions led by Jackson. Had Jackson chosen to frame this discussion around his Zen Buddhist or Lakota Sioux spiritual beliefs, he would have risked alienating his players and would have potentially struggled to create a deep discussion. For this situation, Jackson strategically used the most appropriate spiritual tradition to accomplish his intended goals.

That being said, Jackson does have a choice to make before presenting this exercise to his players. He could simply facilitate an ethical discussion with the absence of any religious background. Jackson chooses to include a religious component for a couple reasons. First, and this gets to the basis of belief and faith, is that everything humans believe in requires some level of faith in something that cannot be proven. To even have ethical discussion, people must discuss a level of faith in something. Christianity is familiar to many of his players, and so it provides an existing framework for this discussion. Jackson also chooses to use a spiritual framework because it connects players to each other through something greater than themselves. Whether the players actually believe in a divine being or some sort of connection between living beings is not necessarily important. What is important is the realization that there are values and beliefs that connect the players as people and as teammates. Even at a basic level, this exercise works to develop a deeper, or higher, connection between players and their environment. This is the case with many of the exercises Jackson incorporates in his coaching. Another example of Jackson’s use of spirituality as a framework to coach his players is when he has them do certain
drills in complete silence.\textsuperscript{33} This exercise has its origin in meditation and mindfulness, strategies Jackson believes help to create an unspoken bond between people. A silent practice does not need to have any specific spiritual references, but Jackson chooses to identify to his players that its ultimate purpose is based in spiritual beliefs and a higher connection between each other. This is a very conscious decision on Jackson’s part.

When it comes to skills such as communication and focus, Jackson employs Zen Buddhism and meditation to train his players. Through his own practice of meditation, Jackson has realized the enormous power it can have in the habit of quieting the mind and enhancing focus. Jackson states that most of his players struggle with controlling their mind: “Many of the players I’ve worked with tend to lose their equanimity after a certain point as the level of competition rises, because their minds start racing out of control.”\textsuperscript{34} It is crucial for players to have clear minds during the game, especially in tight or important games. There will undoubtedly be moments when players are challenged and become flustered, and so those that can stay level-headed will likely have the most success. Jackson teaches his players meditation in order to build skills that help them work to become more relaxed and focused. While Jackson does use some spiritual rhetoric to frame the larger purpose of what he is doing, he does not require anything ideological from his players. For example, when explaining the purpose of meditation and mindfulness, Jackson references an influence of his, Suzuki Roshi. He writes in his book: “To become mindful, one must cultivate what Suzuki Roshi calls ‘beginner’s mind,’ an ‘empty’ state free from limiting self-centered thoughts. ‘If your mind is empty,’ he writes in Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind, ‘it is always ready for anything; it is open to everything. In the

\textsuperscript{33} Jackson and Delehanty, \textit{Sacred Hoops}, 119.
\textsuperscript{34} Jackson and Delehanty, \textit{Sacred Hoops}, 116.
beginner’s mind there are many possibilities; in the expert’s mind there are few.”35 This is the kind of rhetoric Jackson uses when explaining these concepts to his players because that is the way that he understands them. Though Jackson teaches with this specific rhetoric, he does expect his players to show that they accept his beliefs or participate in rituals they do not accept. Above is how Jackson explains the intricate purpose behind mindfulness and meditation, but he introduces it to them as something that will be helpful to them in a pragmatic sense. He first has them start meditating before tape sessions, a time where coaches critique the play of their team and individual players. Understandably, this can be a stressful experience as the players can be criticized and told to change. Jackson introduces meditation before these sessions in order to “put them in the right frame of mind.”36 As mentioned above, Jackson is not requiring a great deal from his players in terms of the theological aspects of Zen Buddhism. He just wants them to relax and clear their minds with the goal of changing their attitude. Phil Jackson later would bring in George Mumford to lead a three-day mindfulness course. Mumford is a meditation instructor and colleague of Jon Kabat-Zinn, who is well known for his work studying the effect meditation and mindfulness can have on the human brain and body. According to Jackson, Mumford essentially eliminates any spiritual or religious aspect of meditation:

Here’s the basic approach Mumford taught the players: sit in a chair with your spine straight and your eyes downcast. Focus your attention on your breath as it rises and falls. When your mind wanders (which it will, repeatedly), note the source of the distraction (a noise, a thought, an emotion, a bodily sensation), then gently return the attention to the breath. This process of noting thoughts and sensations, then returning the awareness to the breath is repeated for the duration of the sitting.37

35 Ibid., 118.
36 Jackson and Delehanty, Sacred Hoops, 118.
37 Ibid., 119.
Mumford focuses exclusively on the physical and mental aspects of meditation, while avoiding the spiritual aspect. This strategy may have been more appealing to those players that did not connect with the spiritual and religious content of Jackson’s teachings. Additionally, it shows the players the very real connection that mindfulness has with positive medical results, likely convincing players who are skeptical of the practice that it is actually effective. By including Mumford’s mindfulness course, Jackson is able to try both strategies with his players, and hopefully connect to them in one way or the other.

Players can work themselves into a trap where they are constantly judging their play, rather than being in the moment of the game and making the best decisions. Jackson describes how professional basketball players have been critiqued their entire lives by everyone from their friends to members of the press. Jackson considers part of his job to quiet the noise that can be the undoing of a player or a team. Jackson again uses meditation as a tool to focus the minds of his players, allowing them to “experience stillness of mind in a low-pressure setting off the court.”38 This is Jackson’s strategy for addressing the problem of the wandering and judgmental mind. From a coach’s and athlete’s perspective, this is a very practical use of time and beneficial because it teaches useful skills. Additionally, with the purpose of bolstering his players’ nonverbal communication skills, Jackson holds practice sessions in silence, encouraging his players to extend their practice of mindfulness onto the court. He believes that this type of practice requires a great deal of concentration and ultimately benefits the players by deepening their connection with one another. Some of his players find Jackson’s use of meditation weird or unnecessary. Bill Cartwright, for example, used the meditation sessions as a time to nap, and Michael Jordan never thought they were useful to him. However, they still participated in the sessions because they had confidence in Jackson as their coach and the stated purpose for the

38 Jackson and Delehanty, Sacred Hoops, 117.
team behind the exercise. Jackson believes in the more easily understood purpose behind this exercise, but he also believes that there can be a deeper impact that he does not necessarily need to explain to the team when it is first presented. This deeper impact is the spiritual aspect of what he is trying to get across, but it does not necessarily need to be articulated as such.

Jackson includes many religions in this ‘super-religion,’ but rather than choosing an existing religion such as Christianity, he chooses to use a variety of religions in order to make sure that no one teaching or doctrine dominates, avoiding conflict with players’ beliefs. This speaks to his pragmatism. He does not take any doctrine so seriously that he believes one is more important or more useful than another. Religion and spiritual beliefs are an approach to navigate life. Jackson even says as much, as described by Richard Hoffer in an article about Jackson:

But he insists there’s nothing truly alarming about his M.O., and perhaps nothing truly different. What is religion, anyway, he asks, but a ‘technique’ to get through life, a set of principles and beliefs that are comforting? ‘What do you do in a Roman Catholic service?’ he asks. ‘All that incense? It’s mystery. Part of life is getting sucked into something with others. What we try to do with our group is breathe together, share the same space, find something outside just playing basketball on the court. This ‘spiritual stuff’ brings an act of community to us.’

In Jackson’s interpretation, humans gravitate toward religion because it can act as a guide for how to live one’s life. In this sense, he believes that much can be learned from each tradition, as they each have important lessons to teach. Jackson frequently describes himself as a Zen Christian and cites both traditions’ focus on kindness and compassion as a major reason for why he is drawn to both. Jackson has found a middle ground in his own life where he can apply multiple traditions to the same situation. In this way, Jackson’s teachings do not conflict with those of his players who have Christian faith because he finds a space where they can agree on important values. He understands that there are many paths to a desired outcome. Blending

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demonstrates that no one strategy is always better than another. This again shows Jackson’s pragmatism when it comes to drawing from different religions because he believes that different traditions can teach different lessons to different people. For example, Michael Jordan did not seem to need Jackson’s spiritual strategies to master the game:

Michael has always maintained that he didn’t need any of ‘that Zen stuff’ because he already had a positive outlook on life. Who am I to argue? In the process of becoming a great athlete, Michael had attained a quality of mind few Zen students ever achieve. His ability to stay relaxed and intensely focused in the midst of chaos is unsurpassed.\textsuperscript{40}

Jackson admits that there are many pathways to achieve qualities that can be described as resembling ‘Zen.’ Pulling from multiple traditions gives Jackson and his players the flexibility to take different pathways to high-level play. Additionally, and probably most importantly, Jackson never suggests that there is another deity that could undermine the faith of those who believe in a Christian God. It is not clear whether Jackson does this consciously, whether he himself believes in a Christian God, or whether he does not believe in a deity at all. However, this is not as important as the way he presents these teachings to his teams. Even for those of his players who hold no religious beliefs, Jackson’s framing of religious teachings is done in a way that tries to find common ground and aspects that will appeal to everyone. Richard Hoffer explains this in his article about Jackson:

Jackson doubts that Jordan--who because of his bigger-than-Buddha role had to be converted to Jackson’s side to make the coach’s situation tenable--is going to embrace Zen beliefs anytime soon. But Jackson was certain, almost from the moment he took over the team seven years ago, that Jordan would not fight his techniques. ‘Michael really likes the community aspect of basketball,’ Jackson says. ‘He likes doing stuff with males. And the reality is, there’s a certain amount of noncommunicative energy that goes on among all of us. That’s spiritual--what joins us together as human beings, allows us an extraordinary group effort. Michael buys into that.\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{40} Jackson and Delehanty, \textit{Sacred Hoops}, 174.
It is Jackson’s techniques that draw his players to embrace his strategy, not so much his focus on spirituality. What Jackson calls spirituality, Michael Jordan might call team bonding. However, from Jackson’s perspective, he is succeeding at tapping into Michael Jordan’s spiritual inclinations while at the same time not overtly defining their team interactions as spiritual or religious.

Jackson further draws on his spiritual influences when trying to emphasize the parallels between war and professional sports. Having had close relationships with members of the Lakota Sioux tribe on the Pine Ridge Reservation, Jackson adopts their spiritual beliefs to inform his life and his coaching. Parallels are drawn between war and sports constantly, as they both can be demonstrations of the highest ability of human physical and mental ability. War obviously has very serious consequences for the health and lives of those involved. Athletics and sports are ways for people to compete at the highest level a human body can without killing each other. Football, rugby, boxing, and wrestling are more extreme sports where this connection is more apparent, but this connection still extends to the game of basketball. It is not nearly as physical and is much less reminiscent of fighting, but the level of competition is the same. The players still consider their opponents their enemies when they are on the floor, but respect each other greatly on and off the floor. They often refer to playing in a game as the equivalent to “going into battle.” They still believe they are “in the trenches” with their teammates during challenging times. Watch any NBA game and you are guaranteed to hear some phrase by commentators referencing war. This is no coincidence. While most players have never been to war and likely never will, this kind of rhetoric can have a powerful effect on the building of a community amongst players. Referencing war and the use warrior rhetoric can help create a bond within teams. It positions them as being a part of an experience together and in opposition to an ‘other.’
The players cannot help but feel a connection to one another when their job is framed like that. From Jackson’s perspective, it makes sense to draw from the Lakota Sioux tribe in order to build a feeling of solidarity amongst his players. One way Jackson does this is by introducing his players to the Lakota war chant, ‘hanta yo,’ “which means ‘the spirit goes ahead of us.””⁴²Jackson explains this as “the warrior’s way of saying he was totally at peace with himself as he rode into battle, ready to die, if necessary.”⁴³ Jackson’s players are not actually going to battle or preparing to die, but he wants them to have this attitude. He wants them to be prepared to give everything they have and defend their teammates. Jackson draws this discussion from a movie called *The Mystic Warrior*. It is a movie inspired by the famous Sioux warrior Crazy Horse. Jackson admits that many parts of the movie are not accurate, as told to him by his friends in the Lakota Sioux tribe, however, Jackson states that the movie “sharply illustrated the importance of making personal sacrifices for the good of the group.”⁴⁴ Even though Jackson’s depiction of the Lakota Sioux is not entirely accurate and does not go into detail about the intricacies of Lakota belief, he uses this example to teach a practical and essential aspect of teamwork. This is Jackson’s best attempt at getting across a message to his players. He even incorporates clips of *The Mystic Warrior* in between clips of game film when critiquing players, allowing him to lighten the mood while at the same time teaching a lesson. An argument can be made that this takes away from the original intent and purpose of the Lakota religion and that this appropriation does not do justice to those that devoutly practice it. However, Jackson does have great respect for the Lakota religion and truly believes in many facets of its teachings. His ultimate goal is to get his players to see the higher purpose of these teachings, but in these moments he simply

⁴² Jackson and Delehanty, *Sacred Hoops*, 112.

⁴³ Ibid., 112.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 111.
introduces them to get a point across. A great deal can be learned from different religions around the globe outside the realm of devout belief. Phil Jackson is an excellent example of this, and by drawing from the Lakota Sioux he is able to develop camaraderie within his team, which is a necessary element for their success.

His players’ confidence in his teachings further demonstrates the effectiveness of using these different spiritual teachings to develop close connections with and among his players. For example, one of Jackson’s players, B.J. Armstrong, really takes to heart Jackson’s teachings: “More than any other player, B.J. Armstrong took meditation to heart and studied it on his own. Indeed, he attributes much of his success as a player to his understanding of not thinking, just doing…” The game happens so fast, the less I can think and the more I can just react to what’s going on, the better it will be for me and, ultimately, the team.”45 Even Michael Jordan, who according to Jackson was skeptical of some of his tactics, believed Jackson’s strategies to be worthwhile and effective. Roland Lazenby, in his biography of Jackson, writes that Michael Jordan, when talking about Jackson’s new team, “advised the young Lakers to heed Jackson’s ministrations, no matter how unusual they seemed.”46 While not every one of Jackson’s players went on to study meditation on their own, at least some did, and it appears to have had a huge impact on his career. Part of Jackson’s strategy of drawing on many spiritual influences is his attempt to strike an impactful chord in his players. Some lessons and practices may bore one player, yet be life-changing for another. Jackson uses such a broad range of tactics with the ultimate goal of connecting with each individual player. He is not unlike a teacher trying different pedagogic strategies in order to inspire something within a student. His unique strategy

45 Jackson and Delehanty, Sacred Hoops, 120.
46 Lazenby, Mindgames, 14.
is to have a spiritual aspect as a part of his coaching and it is especially pertinent. Its pertinence stems from the fact that spirituality and religion connect humans together to be a part of something greater than themselves. Sports and athletic teams can have the same effect.
CHAPTER II:

FOSTERING THE GROUP

Jackson works with many different strategies in order to foster a group mentality and develop a community within his teams. This starts with having a vision for the group and articulating that to the players. He makes sure that they understand where they are trying to go. Jackson must translate this vision to his coaching techniques. One prominent coaching technique is the triangle offense, which Jackson incorporates in all of his championship teams. Though the offense has been a staple of his success, another key component to his success is the confidence his players have in him when they buy into his strategies. Kobe Bryant is an example of a player who credits Jackson with having a huge impact on his career. However, at first, Bryant, like many other players, was a bit skeptical of what Jackson was doing, so Jackson needed to tread carefully when introducing his methods to his teams. I take a look at the documentary *Dhamma Brothers* as an example of the religious use of meditation in a non-religious social context. This places Jackson in the context of a larger social phenomenon, and helps to show the difficulties when introducing these ideas in a new environment. It also shows an example for how religious meditation can be used to connect people who have no background in that religion whatsoever, while also not requiring them to become followers of that religion.

Jackson’s act of blending spiritual traditions does exactly this, and taps into his players’ spiritual inclinations, contributing to community building within his teams. The players on Jackson’s teams come from different places, backgrounds, and belief systems, yet it is his job to pull them all together to form a cohesive community. Jackson tries to create what could be described as a ‘super-religion’ that does not conflict with individual players’ existing beliefs, and
is able to connect the team through a different level of ideology. This is very different from how
the typical environment of an NBA team or professional sports team is created. Despite the fact
that the ‘big four’ American sports leagues are team based, American sports culture is focused on
the accomplishments of individuals and their responsibility in the success of their teams. The
quarterback on an NFL team, for example, is almost always the most talked about player in any
franchise. They are considered the leaders of their teams, and the responsibility of the success or
failure of a team typically rests on their shoulders, whether that is deserved or not. American
culture and media want to point to one person as the hero of a team or to one person as the
reason for the failure of a team. This point is apparent in the way that young athletes in middle
school, high school, and college are treated as they start to become successful. From an early
age, athletes are told how amazing their skills are and how great they are. Children and adults
both show how much they adore successful athletes, and most athletes become accustomed to
this kind of praise. It feeds their egos and makes them focused on individual accomplishment.
This is not to say that every athlete turns into an arrogant, ego-driven, out of touch person. There
are countless examples of stoic, humble athletes who care about the team and the well-being of
those around them. However, this is to say that there is a very individual-focused environment
surrounding athletes from as soon as they become successful and this can become an issue when
it comes to developing successful teams at the highest level. Every player who reaches the NBA
has been the alpha on almost every other athletic team they have been a part of, so arriving in the
NBA can be quite an adjustment. Each team has fifteen players who all have an alpha mentality,
and may be unwilling, or have great difficulty adjusting to a role where they need to take a
backseat. Mix this issue in with the fact that most of the players are young adults, making huge
sums of money, dealing with the pressures of fame, with a strong desire to win, and it can be
extremely difficult to get everyone on a team focused on the same goal, playing for each other, and having fun. Jackson’s challenge is to do exactly that. By working spiritual and religious concepts into his coaching, Jackson is able to create this ‘super-religion’ that guides the players to focus on what is most important for the team. He does not draw on the typical incentives used in professional sports such as catering to the ego of a certain player or praising them publicly to gain their respect. Jackson wants his players to realize that playing for one another, and the connection that they develop between each other is more important than the amount of minutes they play, the media attention they receive, or the amount of money they make. Even winning, the ultimate goal for these teams, is something that Jackson needs to encourage in a roundabout way. Winning cannot be the aspect that makes or breaks the team, otherwise they will have constant ups and downs and the players will lose sight of what is important.

Jackson’s ‘super-religion’ draws from existing traditions to create an environment that guides players away from this typical NBA space, and points them inward. It is supposed to connect players beyond the material incentives of the professional sports world. The aspect of this ‘super-religion’ is the importance of a vision, as Jackson learned from the Lakota Sioux tribe. Jackson emphasizes frequently in his books how important it is to have a vision in order to lead a successful team. If the team has no picture in its mind and culture of where it wants to be, then a team has no starting point. Jackson describes the importance of a vision: “My first act after being named head coach of the Bulls was to formulate a vision for the team. I had learned from the Lakota and my own experience as a coach that vision is the source of leadership, the expansive dream state where everything begins and all is possible.”47 While the vision at the beginning of a season may not be achieved by the end of a season, it is powerful and important to have that shared point of view and perspective along the way so that each member involved is

47 Jackson and Delehanty, Sacred Hoops, 89.
striving for the same thing. A vision binds each member of the team to the same goal, allowing the 12th or the 15th man on an NBA roster to support the team’s ultimate purpose.

The triangle offense is another integral aspect of Jackson’s coaching that creates an environment where every player feels valued. Phil Jackson is very well known for his use of the triangle offense, a system he has incorporated throughout his coaching career. His use of this offensive system really integrates sports, community building, and collective action. In his books, he explains the fundamental principles of the offense through spiritual rhetoric. This offense is defined by a great deal of ball movement and player movement. It also depends greatly on the context of the play at hand, as the players are expected to respond to what the defense gives them. This requires a unity amongst the players, or what could be described as a spiritual connection between them. Rather than forcing themselves and dominating the movement, the players should go with the flow and follow what is given. Though Jackson does not mention the Chuang Tzu, a foundational Taoist text, as an influence of his, he does talk about Taoism as having an impact on him. This influence is apparent in how he teaches the triangle offense, and his rhetoric is quite similar to a passage in the Chuang Tzu. A man is travelling in the forest and sees another man dive into the water, but does not see him emerge from the waves immediately. Eventually the man emerges, but those watching are alarmed. The man approaches the diver and asks him how he survived the jump into the water. He responds: “I have no way. I began with what I was used to, grew up with my nature, and let things come to completion with fate. I go under with the swirls and come out with the eddies, following along the way the water goes and never thinking about myself. That’s how I can stay afloat.”48 Going with the flow, and allowing the environment to dictate his movements and reactions are essential parts of the Taoist strategy.

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Jackson preaches these same qualities to his players, hoping that they will employ them on the court. This kind of philosophy is evident in the triangle offense when executed correctly, as it should have visible flow and allow the players to have the freedom to work off of one another.

The ultimate goal of the triangle offense is to create a team that can simply switch out any player and have the team will perform the same. Obviously it takes great players to win games and championships, but the foundational idea of the system is that every player is equal and the team is simply looking for the best, and most open shot. Jackson believes the offense to hold ‘Zen Christian’ values:

> It was a more evolved version of the offense we’d run on the Knicks under Red Holzman, and, more to the point, it embodied the Zen Christian attitude of selfless awareness. In essence, the system was a vehicle for integrating mind and body, sport and spirit in a practical, down-to-earth form that anyone could learn. It was awareness in action.\(^{49}\)

Jackson emphasizes the connection that players must have with one another to properly execute the offense. It takes high levels of awareness of your teammates and defenders to react in the most efficient manner. Selflessness is also key to the success of the team. Players must be willing to give up the ball and pass to a teammate when a situation calls for it. Hero-ball (the act of a player trying to take over a game and put the team on their back) has little to no place in the triangle offense. Jackson also emphasizes the Taoist influence on the triangle offense:

> The strength of the triangle offense is that it’s based on the Taoist principle of yielding to an opponent’s force in order to render him powerless. The idea is not to wilt or act dishonorably in the face of overwhelming force, but to be savvy enough to use the enemy’s own power against him. If you look hard enough, you’ll find his weaknesses. Bottom line: there’s no need to overpower when you can out-smart.\(^{50}\)

\(^{49}\) Jackson and Delehanty, Sacred Hoops, 87.

\(^{50}\) Ibid., 136.
The overall concept here is that if you are able to deeply understand and have respect for your opponent, then you will be able to defeat them. This is built on paying attention to your surrounding and your opponent and using this to your advantage. Taoism was most likely not being used when Tex Winter invented the triangle offense, but looking back at the offense it is clear to see that Taoist principles can be identified in its manifestation. The triangle offense relies on the ability of the players to react to what the defense gives them. They must exploit the defense’s weaknesses. Because of the fast pace of the game, this takes a great deal of focus and quick reaction time. An important concept in Taoism is wu-wei, which is usually translated as non-action. This translation is a little misleading because it is not the literal act of doing nothing, but rather doing nothing to hinder completely natural action. Every action is an opportunity to pursue wu-wei, and so any action can be spiritual. Those that have attained wu-wei have reached a state of being in which they act naturally and participate in spontaneous action. This spontaneous action is not something that can be reached easily. It requires a great deal of practice to get to this point. This is a little different from typical Western thought, which curtains religion off for certain spaces, days, etc. Jackson works to expand his players’ cultural views and help them see that spirituality can be accessed in places and at times different from what they have likely been taught. Though Jackson does not go into as much detail as this, it is essentially what he means when he is trying to get his players to understand the fundamental pillars of the triangle offense. Its success is dependent on a deep connection being forged between the players so that they can essentially attain wu-wei and act effortlessly and spontaneously while on the court. Jackson uses these many techniques to tap into his spiritual inclinations and hopefully enlighten them in some small way about the deeper possibilities of the game of basketball. Obviously some things do not stick with players, or they do not see the point, but the general direction that
Jackson is pointing them toward is one centered around a deep connection and a lasting community.

Kobe Bryant, one of the star players Jackson coached during his time with the Los Angeles Lakers, also realized the deeper aspects of what Jackson was trying to coach his teams. He recalls the impact that Phil Jackson had on him during their time together: “I learned the spirituality of the game. The mindfulness that comes with the game. You know, understanding how to put yourself aside, how to try to quiet your ego. And play effortless basketball.”\(^{51}\) It is evident that Bryant learned a great deal from Jackson, especially the mental aspect of the game. Bryant is well known for having an inflated ego, so to hear those words come out of his mouth is indicative of impact Jackson had on him. In the interview with Ahmad Rashad, Bryant talks about only thinking about basketball in a technical sense before Jackson became his coach. Basketball was a game of strategy to him and the ‘x’s and o’s’ were his focus. He had spiritual inclinations, however, and Jackson was able to draw them out of him and help him realize a higher purpose to the game of basketball. Bryant says so in his own words: “I think what Phil did...Phil piqued my interest in saying maybe there’s a deeper level to this. That maybe there’s something more...there’s something greater to this game.”\(^{52}\) This is probably the best review a coach can get from a star player and it really points to the success that Jackson had in getting his points across. Not only did Bryant expand his understanding of the game of basketball, but it seems that he matured and learned a great deal about the purpose behind seemingly mundane actions.

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\(^{52}\) Ibid.
Jackson understands the need to present certain spiritual concepts in a way that does not force any of his beliefs on them. This is crucial in his relationship with Michael Jordan, as evidenced in the quote above. Alienating his players is the last thing that Jackson wants to do, so he needs to be very careful in how exactly he presents these ideas. The documentary film *The Dhamma Brothers* by Jenny Phillips, Andrew Kukura, and Anne Marie Stein provides an interesting comparison to the manner in which Jackson presents his ideas. It tells the story of a meditation program that was introduced and executed at a prison in Alabama.\(^53\) By participating in the program, the prisoners agree to do a 10-day Vipassana meditation during which they cannot speak to one another, and spend the majority of their days meditating. Though this is an entirely different environment than an NBA practice floor, there are some similarities. When presenting the idea of this program to the prison, there were concerns from the warden and prison administration beforehand that this program would be teaching against Christianity and trying to convert inmates to Buddhism.\(^54\) Their fears were dispelled when the teachers explained they were not teaching the religion itself, but a meditation practice that has its origins in Buddhism. Though Jackson did not encounter such resistance when presenting his beliefs and practices to his players, he still needed to tread carefully and explain the ultimate purpose of his actions. Many of the prisoners identified that they were religious or spiritual in some way during an orientation to the program. This meant that it was crucial for the teachers to present the program in a secular manner that would not alienate the participants. Similarly, Jackson


\(^{54}\) Ibid.
recognized that many of his players came from deeply religious backgrounds, and needed to cater to his audience in order to achieve the best effect. Just as Jackson’s practices introduced his players to new concepts, ideas and experiences, the Vipassana program introduced many of the prisoners to things they were not used to and had never experienced before, such as prolonged silence, contemplation of feelings, and an intimate view of themselves. After going through this experience, the prisoners felt a sense of accomplishment and brotherhood and a desire to continue the practice. While this documentary depicts a context that is a far cry from the NBA world, it sheds light on the work that Jackson does in his practice settings and explains some of the challenges of introducing concepts and practices from religions into an environment where people have different beliefs and faiths, and might be skeptical of or insulted by its presence. Additionally, it shows what experiences like this can do for a group of men in a common setting, and shines light on why Phil Jackson incorporates meditation and Buddhism in his coaching.

Jackson’s use of multiple traditions creates an ethical system that translates well into the sporting environment. Many of the teachings from Jackson’s different beliefs overlap to create a coaching strategy where every player is valued and contributes. These teachings focus on compassion (Zen Buddhism and Christianity), having a common vision (Lakota Sioux), and working as a unit on defense (Taoism). Each player needs to feel as though they are an important part of a team, a feeling that requires a great deal of camaraderie and respect among team members. Two of Jackson’s bench players during his time in Chicago, Jack Haley and John


Salley, agreed that Jackson fully uses every player on the team, even in close games. They acknowledge that this is rare in the NBA, that Jackson is “a master at keeping guys on the end of the bench focused and ready to play,” and that on their team “you feel like you’re worth something even if you’re the 12th man.” An essential aspect of Jackson’s coaching is that each member of the team is focused and confident in the fact that they have a role in the team’s success. It is easy for a starting player to feel that they have value on a team and contribute to its success, but it is much more difficult for reserve players to feel this way. These testimonials by Jackson’s former players speak volumes to his success at making each player feel a part of the team. As demonstrated in this chapter, Jackson’s coaching philosophies and techniques help contribute to this environment.

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CHAPTER III:
MAKING THE SECULAR SACRED

Whether they’re willing to acknowledge it or not, what drives most basketball players is not the money or the adulation, but their love of the game. They live for those moments when they can lose themselves completely in the action and experience the pure joy of competition.  59

Phil Jackson
Sacred Hoops

The simple goal of this study is to understand enjoyment, here and now—not as compensation for past desires, not as preparation for future needs, but as an ongoing process which provides rewarding experiences in the present.  60

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
Beyond Boredom and Anxiety

The NBA is a perfect example of American capitalism at work: those that are extremely talented and work hard are rewarded with handsome salaries, fame, and recognition. The league advertises itself around the world, constantly aiming to grow its fan base and ultimately its revenue. The more people that watch and attend games, the more money that goes to toward the players and the owners of NBA franchises. Money, fame, and recognition are huge incentives in American society, and this is no different in the NBA world. Though these are not the only things on the minds of NBA players and aspiring NBA players, they are prominent motives that affect the approach players take to the game of basketball and to their personal lives. We are told time and again that money and fame are not paths to happiness, yet part of us still craves these things and shapes the actions we take. NBA players make the highest average salary of any

59 Jackson and Delehanty, Sacred Hoops, 79.

professional sports league, with the average player making 4.6 million in the 2014-2015 season, so money undoubtedly plays a big role in their lives. They also receive extreme amounts of media attention. The end result is a capitalist environment where players can get caught up in a way of life that does not benefit them on a personal level. It is understandable why an outside observer would question the legitimacy of Jackson’s work in a space like this, as it is difficult to see how his teachings would stick and influence his players to shift their focus from the material benefits at their fingertips. However, Jackson is able to turn this secular and capitalist world into a sacred space and community where players play for one another and for the love of the game. By incorporating different religious traditions in his coaching, Jackson makes basketball about more than just basketball. He uses these different traditions to frame basketball as something beyond a secular and professional pursuit, and more reminiscent of a spiritual experience. This strategy enlarges his players’ worldviews, and affects their ultimate purpose as basketball players.

Jackson is not teaching them doctrine; he is helping them look at the game of basketball in a different way. This spirituality is not necessarily something taught, but rather, something experienced. Jackson could require his players to hold the ideological beliefs of his influences and make them practice them, but that does not do anything except to force them to believe in something they do not believe themselves. He is not a parent teaching his children how he believes the world works. He is their coach, encouraging certain behavior and hoping certain experiences enlarge their minds. Players buy into their coach’s strategies and philosophies because they believe they will help them get better as a player and as a team. They are not prospective believers going to a bible study course or a Zen Buddhist meditation. They are

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professional athletes looking to get better and win. Yet even for non-believer athletes, spirituality can have an important impact. So in order for Jackson to be successful, he needs to go about the spiritual aspect in a roundabout way. At the end of the day Jackson is hired to win games, however, he believes that for players and teams to be successful, they must come together on a deeper level and be playing basketball for more than just money, fame, and winning. Jackson is trying to create value through an experience that is beyond these things.

*Selling Spirituality* by Jeremy Carrette and Richard King can question the legitimacy of Jackson’s attempt at creating a spiritual community among his teams. They believe there is a great deal of ambiguity surrounding the word spirituality and so their work “emerges from a frustration with the lack of clarity and critical discussion of the concept of spirituality.” As a result of there being “no essence or definitive meaning to terms like spirituality or religion,” these terms can be used in almost any sphere. This means that any religion or spiritual tradition can be taken out of its original context and used in an entirely different realm. Carrette and King are correct on this assessment, as the terms are ambiguous and do not point to anything very specific, contributing to their pliability. It is this ambiguity, however, that allows creativity in the spiritual realm to thrive. Some scholars want religion to be identifiable and be matched with clear labels. They want to police the boundary between religious and secular spaces. Vince Miller is one scholar who fits this description. In his book *Consuming Religion*, he makes a similar observation as Carrette and King, pointing out “the changing nature of the social and institutional aspects of religion, such as the rise of ‘spirituality’ as the dominant form of religions

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63 Ibid., 3.
belief and the so-called ‘deregulation’ of religion.” Both Carrette and King, and Miller recognize the rise of the idea of spirituality and the ambiguity surrounding it. The vagueness around spirituality tolerates everything and anything to be spiritual, which frustrates those that want there to be a clear definition to what religion and spirituality are.

Yet, as mentioned above, the idea of spirituality, at least in Jackson’s sense of the word, is that it is something experienced, rather than something articulated, placing priority on experience and action over definition and ideology. This is part of the reason Jackson employs so many different spiritual traditions in his coaching. Each of them use different rhetoric and concepts, but point to a very similar idea, which is that of spirituality. Jackson cannot define spirituality for his players; he can simply guide them and help them to realize this greater connection between each of them. Carrette and King might interpret this action as an example for why spirituality simply has become another product to be sold on the market, as Jackson morphs and uses it to his own benefit. Jackson does indeed need to sell the concept of spirituality to his players, as he wants them to buy into the idea that they are participating in something beyond just themselves and the game of basketball. So Jackson does fall into this category of ‘selling’ spirituality to his players because he believes in the power it has to transform his team. However, Jackson’s ‘selling’ is not the negative form of ‘selling’ that Carrette and King are discussing. If Jackson were in this category, he would be trying to promote more individualistic goals for his players. His goals are always team oriented and focused on what is best for the group. He is not doing this for his own benefit, and neither is he pillaging these religions in a way that hurts their ultimate purpose.

Looking at Jackson’s practices from the surface level, it would seem that Carrette and King take issue with Jackson’s approach because of its lack of requirements for players to follow

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64 Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 73.
in order to be a part of their spiritual community. They have a problem with this “accommodationist orientation”\textsuperscript{65} because it promotes “accommodation to the social, economic, and political mores of the day and provide[s] little in terms of a challenge to the status quo or to a lifestyle of self-interest and ubiquitous consumption.”\textsuperscript{66} This criticism does not apply to Jackson, however, because he is not trying to sell people a product in the hopes of making money or acquiring fame. Additionally, he is actively trying to work against the social and economic mores of the NBA culture by getting his players to play for something beyond money and fame. Though he does not require them to religiously perform certain rituals or hold specific beliefs, he does make them have a commitment to the team and to the goals of that group. There is a deep purpose behind his use of spirituality. He has a goal in mind for his team, and he believes trying to bridge the gap between the sacred and everyday life will benefit them greatly, not only on the court, but also in the lives of each of the people involved.

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Jackson often refers to himself as a Zen Christian, a term that encapsulates his affinity for aspects of both Zen Buddhism and Christianity. Jackson discusses this mix in \textit{Sacred Hoops}:

“When I was a boy, I was so caught up in the mental aspects of worship--building a wall in my mind with prayers and quotations from the Bible--that I lost track of the essence of Christianity. But by practicing Zen, I was able to clear my mind of all that interference and open my heart again. Merging Zen and Christianity allowed me to reconnect with my spiritual core and begin to integrate my heart and mind. The more I learned about the similarities between the two religions, the more compatible they seemed. Was Christ a Zen master? That may be a stretch, but clearly he was practicing some form of meditation when he separated himself from his disciples and became one with ‘the Father.’”\textsuperscript{67}

\textsuperscript{65} Carrette and King, \textit{Selling Spirituality}, 5.

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 5.

\textsuperscript{67} Jackson and Delehanty, \textit{Sacred Hoops}, 52.
Jackson was raised by Pentecostal ministers and born into an extreme side of the Christian experience, and in ways, he admits, it cut him off from fully connecting with himself and those around him.\textsuperscript{68} All of the memorization of verses and prayers made it difficult for Jackson to have a fulfilling religious experience. Practicing meditation and Zen Buddhism helped Jackson to deepen his understanding of himself and ultimately his view of the world.\textsuperscript{69} He had a sound understanding of the Pentecostal faith, yet it was not the right fit in his life. That did not mean that it had no place in his life whatsoever, but rather that its role in his life needed to shift. Jackson’s exposure to Zen Buddhism helped to change his Christian belief, and ultimately shifted his belief to a space between the two, where they overlapped and complemented one another. This was Jackson’s experience, and while he had a great understanding of the Christian religion, it was not leading him where he wanted to be. Incorporating Zen Buddhism in his life helped him, and he encountered it by chance, not by seeking it out. It makes sense that he wanted to give his players the same opportunity to see if learning concepts and ideas from Zen Buddhism or other traditions might help them in their lives, or help them see the world in a slightly different light. Jackson does need to ‘sell’ his players on these ideas so that they do not see him as crazy or trying to convert them, but rather see his intention as giving them tools to try to improve their lives.

The Zen Buddhist and Christian mix, exemplifying this modern spirituality, would qualify as too broad and too accommodating according to Carrette and King: “In a sense, the most troubling aspect of many modern spiritualities is precisely that they are not troubling enough. They promote accommodation to the social, economic and political mores of the day and provide little in terms of a challenge to the status quo or to a lifestyle of self-interest and

\textsuperscript{68} Jackson and Delehanty, \textit{Sacred Hoops}, 52.

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 52.
 ubiquitous consumption.”  

Jackson does provide accommodation in the sense that he avoids conflicting with his players’ beliefs. He recognizes that many of his players come from deeply religious backgrounds, just as he did, and so he does not to compete with that background whatsoever.

He actively avoids saying or doing anything that would offend his players that come from deeply religious backgrounds. Jackson is not a missionary trying to convert his players to a particular religious denomination. Carrette and King seem to define a world where religion is either in your face in the sense that it challenges your beliefs, behaviors, habits, etc. and one must really commit to, or it is not to be used at all. In order to understand all the complexities of a religion, including its history, canon, and requirements, one must be fully immersed in learning and living a religion. This makes it very difficult for those who have not been exposed to certain religions or who do not have the time to study other religious traditions to fall into these categories and not be stuck somewhere in between. This is where Jackson’s teachings come in, as he is trying to have multiple different religious traditions complement one another, as well as complement the beliefs of those who do not hold religious beliefs.

When discussing the transcendent aspect of the term spirituality, Carrette and King criticize how this transcendence is mostly sold as simply transcendence of the self, rather than transcendence of a group or of society: “The business usage of spirituality almost always carries the latter interiorised meaning of ‘self-transcendence’. This makes it easier to construct a spirituality that remains firmly located within the individual self rather than oriented towards society.”

Jackson’s work falls outside of this critique, as he is not asking his players to be only


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70 Carrette and King, Selling Spirituality, 5.

71 Oprah. 2013. “How Legendary NBA Coach Phil Jackson Taught His Teams Mindfulness.”

72 Carrette and King, Selling Spirituality, 50.
inwardly focused. He wants them to have empathy, to show compassion for one another, and ultimately to have a transcendent experience as a team. Jackson’s exercises and teachings are always team-focused. Here is what Jackson has to say about his role as a leader:

In terms of leadership, this means treating everyone with the same care and respect you give yourself--and trying to understand their reality without judgment. When we can do that, we begin to see that we all share basic human struggles, desires, and dreams. With awareness, the barriers between people gently give way, and we begin to understand, directly, remarkably, that we’re part of something larger than ourselves.\(^\text{73}\)

This is just a glimpse at the tone of Jackson’s coaching. He is drawing from his understanding of Buddhism when discussing awareness and non-judgment. Non-judgment also ties into Jackson’s Christian belief in compassion and having empathy for others. This kind of rhetoric is trying to draw his team closer together and forge connections between teammates in order to create a shared bond and experience.

Carrette and King also want to look at the broader, societal level impact that this use of spirituality has on the people that encounter it. This is especially relevant when looking at the reach that Jackson’s books have. Carrette and King ask this question: “What are the socio-political effects of the decision to classify specific practice or philosophies as ‘spiritual’ and who benefits from such constructions?"\(^\text{74}\) The socio-political effects of Jackson’s practices come into play when he writes books about his experiences and sells them to the public. There is an aura of godliness and spirituality surrounding Jackson and Michael Jordan because of the incredible success they have had on the basketball court. Jackson’s unorthodox use of religion and spirituality in his coaching has increased this aura, and allows him to sell many books based on his understanding of spirituality. The broader ramifications of Jackson’s appeal to a wide audience are unclear, though it does not appear that his books are encouraging others to engage

\(^{73}\) Jackson and Delehanty, *Sacred Hoops*, 154.

\(^{74}\) Carrette and King, *Selling Spirituality*, 3.
in his version of spirituality in an effort to improve their lives or alleviate their problems.

Jackson can be accused of picking-and-choosing from different religions and not giving each individual religion the theological background that truly explains the religion. However, this does not pose a serious problem because it is simply how Jackson became acquainted with the religions. He did not go out of his way to search for religions to appropriate, rather he picked up on certain aspects and beliefs from his encounters, and he followed where those encounters and beliefs took him. His books and his coaching style are representative of how he has picked up on and incorporated religion and spirituality in his own life. The media represents Jackson in a certain way and tries to sell what they think people will find fascinating about him. The public is more interested in learning about Jackson turning out the lights in practice,\textsuperscript{75} or burning incense in the locker room,\textsuperscript{76} rather than about how these practices took shape and what their deeper purposes are. The media attention Jackson receive attempts to present Jackson in this light so that followers and readers will consume material on him. While these are true, eccentric stories, they unfortunately only focus on the eye-catching practices of Jackson and fail to properly address the greater purpose of what he is trying to do. This project is attempting to give a significant investigation to what he is doing beyond these attention-grabbing details. Those that write about Jackson in this way are truly the people who in Carrette and King’s eyes would be guilty of ‘selling spirituality.’ His nickname the Zen Master, for example, is one that grabs the attention of those who read it. This nickname does not do his coaching style justice and boils all of his strategies down to a term that does not really mean anything. The selling of Jackson’s spirituality as something cool and attention-grabbing is a misrepresentation of what he actually does and is an unintended consequence of Jackson’s work.

\textsuperscript{75} Oprah. 2013. “How Legendary NBA Coach Phil Jackson Taught His Teams Mindfulness.”

\textsuperscript{76} Lazenby, \textit{Mindgames}, 13.
The final critique that Carrette and King might make of Jackson is his tendency to “pay lip-service to the ‘exotic’, rich and historically significant religions of the world at the same time as distancing themselves from any engagement with the worldviews and forms of life that they represent.”77 But such a criticism could be made only by those who are not familiar with Jackson’s background or his intentions. He incorporates teachings and stories from many different traditions, and this jumping around could come off as a lack of deeper engagement with each individual tradition. While Jackson does not go in depth with the history of each religion and does not discuss many of the prominent individuals within the tradition, he works with fundamental concepts and ideas. When discussing Buddhism, Jackson talks about the concepts of unceasing change, awareness, non-judgment, oneness in duality, and the connectedness between all things. He draws a great deal from the teachings in Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind, which, although not wholly reflective of the Zen Buddhist tradition, provides the basis for Jackson’s teachings. Compassion is a huge aspect of what Jackson is trying to teach, and some of those teachings sound heavily influenced by Shunryū Suzuki: “All self-centered thoughts limit our vast mind. When we have no thought of achievement, no thought of self, we are true beginners. Then we can really learn something. The beginner’s mind is the mind of compassion. When our mind is compassionate, it is boundless.”78 This is exactly the mentality that Jackson wants his players to have when they are out on the court together. Jackson is not just paying lip service to these traditions, he is teaching them just as a real ‘Zen Master’ would. Other big aspects of Suzuki’s teachings are proper posture and breathing. He makes the point that the right practice of these two things is much more important than understanding the deeper concepts of Buddhism:

77 Carrette and King, Selling Spirituality, 17.

The most important things in our practice are our physical posture and our way of breathing. We are not so concerned about a deep understanding of Buddhism. As a philosophy, Buddhism is a very deep, wide, and firm system of thought, but Zen is not concerned about philosophical understanding. We emphasize practice. We should understand why our physical posture and breathing exercise are so important. Instead of having a deep understanding of the teaching, we need a strong confidence in our teaching, which says that originally we have Buddha nature. Our practice is based on this faith.\textsuperscript{79}

In his interview with Oprah Winfrey, Jackson talks about teaching his players the right posture and the right way of holding themselves during meditation sessions.\textsuperscript{80} More importantly, however, Suzuki defends Jackson’s use of meditation and Zen Buddhist practices, without having to teach them deep lessons about the religion. That being said, Jackson’s teachings do touch on very important concepts in the Zen Buddhist tradition and do not simply gloss over the exotic aspects. However, in response to Carrette and King, this serious background is not needed to use aspects of Buddhism in a new and different context. Jackson puts them into practice and expects his players to engage with them to a certain level. As Jackson describes many times, he does not force any of his beliefs or practices on the players, so there are no theological requirements that come with his coaching. As for ideological requirements, Jackson has few. The only thing he requires of his players is that they buy into the vision for the team and make a commitment to their teammates.

Vincent Miller’s book, \textit{Consuming Religion}, can also be looked at as a critique of Jackson’s work. Miller makes similar points to Carrette and King and touches on the ambiguity of ‘spirituality’, as well as the problems of consumption and accommodation that the word represents.\textsuperscript{81} Miller points out the demand for religions to stray from their traditional teachings in


\textsuperscript{80} Oprah, “How Legendary NBA Coach Phil Jackson Taught His Teams Mindfulness.”

\textsuperscript{81} Miller, \textit{Consuming Religion}, 77.
order for there to be an exchange or a sharing of religious ideas: “On the other hand, we witness a great hollowing out. Exchange demands interchangeability, equivalence. Anything that stands in the way of exchange becomes a problem. Rough edges must be smoothed. Objects must now function outside of their original contexts.” Exchange absolutely does require interchangeability and equivalence, and the occurrence of this in religious exchange is the same as any other form of exchange. Religion is subject to the same changes and interactions that other different sets of beliefs and understanding are. When two languages come into contact with one another, there are certain words in each language that cannot be articulated to the speaker of the other language. Words and feelings are taken out of their ‘original’ context in order to explain them to those who cannot understand. Just as languages have changed over time, so have religions. Christianity today is not what it once was. Encountering different people and ideas have shaped Christianity through its history. The many denominations of Protestantism in the United States are evidence of this. Each denomination ‘sells’ its own unique way of practicing Christianity, and denominations can differ greatly. Even the marketing of products such as totems or trinkets as spiritual in order to make a profit or gain fame is not entirely bad, although Miller believes that this kind of action “spawns an interest in the material aspects of religion.”

Selling or buying an object from a religion does remove it from its original context, but this does not mean that the object is being used in a degrading way. For example, Jackson fills the Chicago Bulls’ team room with totems and other objects which he has been gifted and has collected through his connection with the Lakota Sioux tribe. He describes the team room as

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82 Miller, Consuming Religion, 77.
83 Ibid., 78.
84 Jackson and Delehanty, Sacred Hoops, 11.
the “inner sanctum of the Chicago Bulls—a sacred space adorned with Native American totems and other symbolic objects.” These objects include “a wooden arrow with a tobacco pouch tied to it—the Lakota Sioux symbol of prayer,” a “bear claw necklace” that transfers “power and wisdom upon its beholder,” the “middle feather of an owl (for balance and harmony); a painting that tells the story of the great mystical warrior, Crazy Horse; and photos of a white buffalo calf born in Wisconsin.”85 Jackson explains that “to the Sioux, the white buffalo is the most sacred of animals, a symbol of prosperity and good fortune.”86 These are all objects taken way out of their original contexts as they are all symbolically important to the Lakota people, but have little meaning to Jackson’s players who have never encountered Native American religion. Jackson is able to inject symbolism and meaning into these objects by the way he introduces their purpose to his team. He designed their team room in this way to “reinforce in the players’ minds that [their] journey together each year, from the start of training camp to the last whistle in the playoffs, [was] a sacred quest.”87 Additionally, he wanted the team room to be “[their] holy sanctuary, the place where the players and the coaches come together and prepare [their] hearts and minds for battle, hidden from the probing eyes of the media and the harsh realities of the outside world.”88 And finally, he wants their team room to be the place “where the spirit of the team takes form.”89 Jackson wants to use some sort of object to make their journey and their space tangibly sacred and the Native American objects help him achieve this goal. They ultimately help focus each team member and coach on the task that they want to accomplish as a

85 Jackson and Delehanty, Sacred Hoops, 11.

86 Ibid., 11.

87 Ibid., 11.

88 Ibid., 12.

89 Ibid., 12.
team. The specific material objects used are not necessarily as important as the idea that there are objects that help to create an identity and a connection between the team members. However, Jackson is very strategic and chooses Lakota objects rather than Buddhist or Christian objects as the Lakota objects have a warrior and war aspect to them, aspects that relate to the ‘battles’ the players will have on the basketball court. So in this situation, Jackson is employing material objects out of their original context, and not even using them to teach beyond surface level about the Lakota Sioux.

This interest in and use of the material aspects of a religion in an environment that is not rooted in tradition does not take away from or degrade the fundamental purpose of religion. There is still purpose behind what Jackson is doing. Rather than follow a deeply rooted religion with long-standing traditions, Jackson chooses to create his own religious community among his players. As stated before, everyone in the community comes from different families, backgrounds, and other areas of identity, so strictly following an existing religious tradition would be extremely difficult if they wanted to experience the effects of an engaged religious community. So instead of starting from the top and using all the teachings from Christianity or Buddhism, Jackson chooses to pick those aspects from different traditions that will generate a unique community and religious experience for his team. This represents a shift in how religious thought has developed in the Western world.

Monotheism is the norm in the Western world and this is how religion has been viewed through the Western historical lens. Having more than one God or religion is thought of as wrong and in violation of traditional belief systems. Western traditions such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam all teach the idea that one can only achieve salvation through belief in their respective tradition. They all find common ground in their exclusivity. Judith Berling, in her
book, *A Pilgrim in Chinese Culture*, makes the point that Christians and Jews have struggled with religious pluralism and that this is an effect of “the weight of centuries (if not millennia) of exclusivistic attitudes and patterns of association.”90 This exclusivity makes it difficult for those with strong Christian faith to share an understanding of spirituality with those who are not in accordance with Christian faith. The “Christian claims of universal and exclusive salvation create a set of dilemmas for those who seek to be open to their religious neighbors.”91 This exclusivist premise is the assumption that Miller has in his work and that is why he objects to the use of religious objects outside of their original context, as well as to any notion of ‘cafeteria spirituality.’ Cafeteria spirituality is a term to describe the picking and choosing aspect that has come to represent modern spirituality. This type of spirituality, Miller says “militates against the maintenance of the deep coherence of religious and cultural traditions.”92 Miller wants strict parameters on religion, as well as to place serious demands on those who practice it.93 There is no room for mixing in his view of the issue. This appears to be an attempt to promote Miller’s own faith in Christianity and his view of how it should be practiced. It makes sense that if you dedicate your life to a certain faith and a way of following it, that you would be critical of the use of that faith in a way different from your own beliefs.

But this overshadows the development of religion in other parts of the world and the inclusivity that shapes them. It also brings up the fundamental question of what qualifies as religion and what makes a religion legitimate. While Jackson’s religious mixing is a unique


91 Ibid., 27.

92 Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 83.

93 Ibid., 83.
phenomenon in the NBA coaching world, it is not a unique phenomenon in a global context.

Berling discusses her encounters with religious pluralism in China as being based on the “opposite inclusivist, premise”\(^\text{94}\) of the exclusivist force of Western religion.\(^\text{95}\) Religious pluralism is the defining presence in China, with very few people being sole practitioners of one religion. Berling cites W.E. Soothill as having a great description of this phenomenon:

> This premise was stated succinctly by the early student of Chinese religions, W.E. Soothill: ‘While a few of the laity devote themselves, some solely to Buddhism, some solely to Taoism, the great mass of the people have no prejudices and make no embarrassing distinctions; they belong to none of the three religions [Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism], or more correctly, they belong to all three. In other words, they are eclectic, and use whichever form best responds to the requirements of the occasion for which they use religion.’\(^\text{96}\)

This is a clear example of the success that mixing religions can have when there is no demand for exclusivity. It also demonstrates the very pragmatic approach that the Chinese take to religion as they use the religious approach most appropriate for the situation they find themselves in. There is an absence of attachment to a specific tradition for the sole reason of feeling the necessity to stay loyal to that tradition. This strategy is reminiscent of the approach Jackson takes to implementing religion into his coaching. As discussed in Chapter 1, Jackson is a pragmatist when working with different religious traditions in his coaching. In light of Soothill’s observations, a new assumption can be made about the foundation of religious belief. It appears that religion does not need to be the object of exclusive adherence to be considered legitimate religion. The removal of certain concepts or ideas out of their original context does not necessarily degrade a religion or create problems for those who are not traditional devout


\(^\text{95}\) Ibid., 8.

\(^\text{96}\) Ibid., 9.
believers. This kind of religious pluralism demonstrates that religions can learn from each other and grow together to complement one another and provide continued usefulness for a great number of people. This also allows them to morph when encountering new concepts, ideas, and religions in the future, and it does not alienate people who are not engaged in strict, traditional forms of religion. It does not condemn them either. Finally, and most importantly, it does not show a preference or a loyalty to any specific religion, treating them all equally and using them for what they are best at.

Diana Eck describes another uniquely pluralistic community in Fremont, California. According to her, “in 1993, a Methodist Church and an Islamic Society bought adjoining property…named their frontage road Peace Terrace, and broke ground together to build St. Paul’s United Methodist Church and the Islamic Society of the East Bay.” Though not as interconnected as religions are in China as described by Soothill, this is a significant step in religious life in the United States. Sharing a space and a name is a very inclusivist approach to religion. The connection does not stop here, however, as the communities take part in shared rituals and also support each other through difficult times in their community:

In September of 2006, Fremont celebrated its fifty years and its multicultural civic life with a public “Hands Around the Lake” ceremony, ringing a park-lake in the city with a human chain of Fremont citizens. Within a few weeks, the celebratory spirit of multiculturalism was shattered when Alia Ansari, an Afghan Muslim woman wearing hijab, was shot and killed in a residential area while walking to school to pick up her children, her three-year-old child in tow. The murder was deeply unsettling for a city that has struggled with and steered boldly into its own diversity. In response to the violence, Fremont citizens organized a “Wear a Hijab or Turban Day” on which hundreds of citizens wore headgear—a headscarf or a turban—in public solidarity with those who are targeted for their visible difference.98


98 Ibid.
The ‘Hands Around the Lake’ ceremony is a perfect example of people of two religions coming together to perform a ritual together. While they might not characterize this as a formal religious event, it can be considered a religious experience. This chain of people connects them at a community level and creates a shared experience. This is reminiscent of something Jackson would do in the effort to create a bond amongst his team. It is something that does not outwardly appear very religious, yet has spiritual undertones. After the murder of Alia Ansari, the community of Fremont also took part in a semi-religious ritual by wearing a hijab or turban for a day. In an exclusivist setting, Christians wearing a hijab or turban would be not be in line with Christian values, even for a good cause such as this. Again, this ‘Wear a Hijab or Turban Day’ was not meant to be a religious day or to convert any of the Christians to Islam, but it was an act of solidarity, of community building, and it ultimately touched the spirit of everyone involved.

This is the kind of community building that Jackson wants to be a part of. No matter what his players believe in, he wants them to put the team and the community they have built, first. It may take the form of showing compassion for a teammate going through a hard time, such as when Scottie Pippen lost his father: “I thought it was important for the team to acknowledge what was going on with Scottie and give him support. I asked the players to form a circle around him in the locker room and recite the Lord’s Prayer, as we often do on Sundays.”

Or it may instead take the form of sitting in silence to develop deeper, non-verbal communication. There are a myriad of ways that the community can take form. Whether spoken or unspoken, there is a spiritual aspect to this when it is done as a collective group.

Emile Durkheim’s concept of collective effervescence provides shape to the purpose behind what Jackson does. This collective effervescence comes about when “the group of

99 Jackson and Delehanty, Sacred Hoops, 53.
individuals that makes up a society comes together to perform a religious ritual.”\textsuperscript{100} A religious ritual is a time when “the group comes together and communicates in the same thought and participates in the same action, which serves to unify a group of individuals.”\textsuperscript{101} This sounds very similar to the way Jackson describes his interpretation of how to play the game of basketball the right way: “All of us have flashes of this sense of oneness—making love, creating a work of art—when we’re completely immersed in the moment, inseparable from what we’re doing. This kind of experience happens all the time on the basketball floor; that’s why the game is so intoxicating.”\textsuperscript{102} This is what Jackson wants out of his players, for them to get collectively immersed in activity and realize that their sum is greater than the individual parts. There is an energy created between all of the individuals focused on a single goal that cannot be mimicked elsewhere. Collective effervescence continues to relate to this: “When individuals come into close contact with one another and when they are assembled in such a fashion, a certain ‘electricity’ is created and released, leading participants to a high degree of collective emotional excitement or delirium.”\textsuperscript{103} This kind of energy is the players working in unison enjoying the competition, and realizing something greater in the game of basketball. This energy connecting individuals is a “core element of religion” and it “transports individuals into a new realm” where they “feel as if they are in contact with an extraordinary energy.”\textsuperscript{104} In some sense, Jackson is trying to foster a religious experience among his players. He is not actively trying to create a new religion, but at a basic level, he is creating a religious experience. When his players focus their


\textsuperscript{101} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{102} Jackson and Delehanty, Sacred Hoops, 116.

\textsuperscript{103} Paul, “Durkheim’s Philosophy of Religion.”

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid.
energy and action on the same task or same goal, they are able to experience this kind of greater experience together. They are still playing basketball and participating in sport, but Jackson has taken an activity and a profession that is inundated with ego, money, and fame, and injected a deeper value, and a more meaningful experience within it. He has made basketball much, much more than basketball.
CONCLUSION

Jackson ultimately wants to be a part of a community building effort that touches the spirit of those involved in whatever action is being done. Using existing religious rhetoric, concepts, and practices allows him to create this kind of community. His unique coaching style illuminates the success that taking a pragmatic approach to religion can have not only on a basketball team, but also on a group of people focused on the same goal. Jackson essentially wants his players to hold the goals and the values of the team higher than any other thing in their professional lives. This means that each person in locker room should be directing their energy, passion, and action toward that space. Jackson has the choice to turn basketball into a religion, or take one existing religion and force it into the basketball context. Neither of these strategies would work. Turning basketball into a religion would lack meaning and could come off as comical. Forcing one single religion into the basketball context would also be troublesome because it likely would offend or alienate some of the players who do not connect with that specific religion. Instead, Jackson chooses to draw from several religions and use all of them in the basketball context. This solves the dilemma, as he is able to use rhetoric and practices that are meaningful, while not alienating any of the team members. He needs to use existing religious rhetoric and symbols to get his point across as they have foundation in the sacred and can get the attention of his players. Jackson truly falls Robert Wuthnow’s category of artists pushing the boundaries of spirituality. He draws from his own experiences and beliefs and combines them to create a unique combination in a new context. This new context is transcendent team building or community building, which is the function of religion according to Durkheim. While a Christian religious community focuses its energy on God, Jackson is asking his team to essentially focus its energy within, on itself. The use of collective energy develops a bond between each team
member that will allow them to be as successful as possible. Jackson’s view seems to be that a religious community should take the shape of the people that are a part of it. By introducing players or people to new concepts and ideas and figuring out which ones resonate with everyone, Jackson is able to create a community that works for all and makes everyone want to buy into it.

During my time working on this thesis, it became clear to me that there is a great deal of scholarly work looking at sports as a quasi-religious experience for fans, but there was little to none looking at a sports franchise and a team functioning like a religious group. In future studies it would be fascinating to look at whether these two experiences function together as the same religious experience or as separate experiences, and how they interact or inform one another.

Jackson’s work is evidently reflective of a larger cultural phenomenon in the United States of bringing spirituality into the secular world, as described by Jeff Wilson. Jackson’s work is representative of the direction that spirituality in America is headed, as it responds to the desire of new groups, such as his teams, to have religious kinds of experiences outside of traditional religious institutions. As this movement grows, especially the use of mindfulness and meditation in many different spaces, it will be fascinating to study the new contexts and environments that are created. Robert Wuthnow has studied this phenomenon, however, the artists he studied are relatively unknown to the public. This thesis has investigated this same phenomenon, but on a large scale that is on display for significant chunks of the American and world population. As I mentioned throughout this thesis, there are scholars who take issue with the modern phenomenon of spirituality. I would like to reiterate that it is my belief that their concerns lack a full understanding of the full scope of religion, from its origins as an experience to its ultimate purpose for human beings. I hope Jackson’s work, and my thesis, have
demonstrated the quality and legitimacy of bringing spirituality to the secular world and have proven it to be a unique and very successful form of community building.
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