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Popular Culture and the Rituals of American Football

Mark Axelrod
Chapman University, Orange

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Abstract: In his article, "Popular Culture and the Rituals of American Football," Mark Axelrod reflects on meanings of cultural practice in American popular culture. Before globalization -- driven by economics -- became a fact of life with profound implications, there were myths and rituals that provided a kind of insulation from the mysteries of life. These practices were ritualized by "primitive" men and women who, seemingly, did not understand the universe as well as we moderns do. But in fact one only needs to witness throngs of Baltimoreans rushing after a caravan of cars attempting to kiss the Vince Lombardi Trophy as if it were a passing Torah and genuflecting to their NFL Ravens to realize that very little has changed since the days of pine and mosses. In American scholarship, one of the most fascinating areas of myth and ritual, and one of the least explored, is that dealing with American football. Drawing on the thought of Arnold van Gennep, C.G. Jung, and Mircea Eliade among others, Axelrod raises the ritual of the sport from the baseness of physical contact and violence to the level of cultural practice, replete with all the sacred mysteries of any other ritual, past or present.

Mark AXELROD

Popular Culture and the Rituals of American Football

As I write this, once again it's autumn. It's a crisp fall day. About fifty degrees, the October sky is cloudless; the autumn colors are at their peak. The fans stand in line to buy or sell or scalp tickets. Outside the stadium entrance, the fans hear the humming resonance of the crowd and the brassy sounds of marching music. The tickets are handed to a sullen gatekeeper, who rips them in half and directs the natives towards a crowded bowl inside. Female cheerleaders, clad in cramped-fitting outfits, prance along the sidelines. Animal mascots parade in the end zone. Soon, the captains of the two teams meet the referees at midfield. One referee makes the introductions, and then tosses the coin in the air. The toss is called and a collective cheer races throughout the stadium. The captains make the decisions, choose their goals, shake hands, and then jog off the field for last minute instructions from the head coach. Fans stand for the National Anthem, cheering at its conclusion, then remain standing for the opening kickoff. The teams rush onto the field, smack, slap, and head butt each other, energized by the screams of their fans and the currents of adrenaline. Then the kickoff. And after four quarters packed with passes, tackles, sacks, and scores of all numbers, a team has either won or lost and the natives make their way out of the bowl, down the ramp, and homeward.

That would appear to be a capsulized version of the beginning, middle, and end of what has become America's "great American pastime": Football; however, that stops short of what the game truly is. What has really been seen is not merely a football game, but an exercise in ritual, which, though uniformly different in structure, is not much different in content from rituals practiced by more "barbaric" ancestors. The American ritual is a composition of rites that not only fulfills that notion of what is considered "sport," but that which is considered both sacred and mysterious in the sense that the football ritual celebrates the harvest and the fruits of vegetation, emphasizes the struggle between the forces of life and death, and re-enacts the creation of the universe. End of the millennium American technology has led humankind to the point that it believes itself to be significantly more advanced than its primitive ancestors; however true that may be in a relative sense, one thing has not substantially changed: The rituals and the myths that we either consciously or unconsciously re-enact or believe in and how that plays a part in popular culture. The difference between the primitives' rituals and our own is that we have hidden the true meanings of our rituals beneath guises that, at first appearance, seem too far detached from our notion of what constitutes a ritual to be ritualistic. Like primitive man, we are generally not aware that much of what we do in the course of daily life may actually be considered ritualistic. Post-modern humankind would like to think of itself as completely existential, that is, as maker and mover of all things both terrestrial and cosmic and, therefore, without a need for a belief in a "higher order." Because of that self-adulation, we post-modernists have little, ostensibly, of what our archaic descendants had in abundance: Symbols, myths, and rituals, that pay homage to the creation. With the advancement in technology and the decreased interest in organized religion, post-modernists have lost touch with our primitive intuition and, consequently, have apparently lost our need for those symbols and rituals that reflect those intuitive feelings about nature, life, and the cosmos; however, the sacredness that wo/man seems to have lost in a strictly religious sense, has successfully manifested itself in another less obvious but equally sacred way ... sport; and for the purposes of this approach, American football.

Many people, aficionadoes of the sport as well as its antagonists, have attempted to draw parallels between football and the "game of war" under the assumption that football is like war. True enough, the game is abundant with allusions to war, dictated by the terminology of the game (e.g., the bomb, the blitz, the platoon system, the flanks, etc.). Likewise, the defensive units of many teams, especially the professional ones, used to be given colorful pseudonyms, which, if not connoting war, connoted violence (e.g., the venerable Dallas Cowboys' Doomsday Defense or the Denver Broncos' Orange Crush or the Minnesota Vikings' Purple People Eaters or the Los Angeles Rams' Fearsome Foursome or the Pittsburgh Steelers' Steel Curtain). The game actually begins with a "draw of first blood," often ends in "sudden death," and has been replete with

"headhunters," "red dogs," "sacks," "wedges," "spears," "crack back blocks," and "coffin corners"; however, those parallels with violence and war are only a portion of the entire ritual, only rites within the ritual that are actually concerned with much more sacred phenomena. Humankind has not, does not, nor will not live in a vacuum detached from historical events, archetypes, and cosmic religious values. Being a part of the universe, not separate from it, individuals exist in accordance with its laws, whether they accepts them or not; whether they feel his technology and/or intellect raises him above them or not; or whether s/he feels ritual, myth, and religion are or are not part of her everyday experience. In other words, post-modern humans are not outside the pale of socio-cultural history and its myths and rituals. In relation to our manner of being, in our conscious or unconscious ritual enactments, which, though seemingly non-existent, are "eventually" present, we are equal to our ancestors.

Mircea Eliade has written in his book *The Myth of the Eternal Return* that "if one goes to the trouble of penetrating the authentic meaning of an archaic myth or symbol, one cannot but observe that this meaning shows a recognition of a certain situation in the universe and that, consequently, it implies a metaphysical or transcendental position" (3). In its own way, football recapitulates that transcendental position.

The Ticket as a Rite of Participation

Purchasing one's ticket is a rite of participation that allows the buyer/fan/devotee, through the mediation of the ticket, to experience the ritual that follows. As any non-ticket holder knows, one cannot experience the game without one. That is, one cannot participate in the ritual unless one has an object of admittance. True enough, one can watch a game on television, catch glimpses through a fence or beneath a railing, or see it on a replay, but to actually experience the immediacy of the game without being interrupted by commercials is impossible. The ticket, then, allows the buyer to fully experience the ritualistic re-enactment of the creation myth in, what we will see is, a sacred place and during a mythic time. It is a rite of passage in the sense that it allows one to experience an event of transcendental order that leads one to....

The Stadium as a Sacred Place in Mythic Time

Once the ticket has been purchased it is handed to the gatekeeper who, rather unceremoniously, allows one to enter. The gatekeepers are the transitional point between profane and sacred space, between time and timelessness. For the stadium is, in fact, representative of a sacred place, and what takes place within it is timeless. In an earlier era the concept of a sacred place involved the idea of repeating the mystery of creation that consecrated the place by separating it from the profane space around it. An ordinary place became a sacred one because of the eternal quality of the mystery that first consecrated it. The mystery did not replace a given area of profane space thus making it sacred; it ensured that sacredness would continue there forever. In such a way, the place became an unending source of holiness that enabled man, by experiencing the ritual within it, to become one with what was sacred. This simple idea of the place's becoming, by means of a mystery, an eternal center of the sacred, accounts for a variety of apparently diverse systems including football; but, however diverse these holy areas may be, they all share a common item: There is always a clearly-defined boundary within which man communicates with what is sacred. The ultimate example of this is the Super Bowl, about which more will be said later; however, every football stadium or arena shares that same religious quality of being a sacred place. In addition, there is also the remarkable relationship between the actual shape of the stadium, its internal structure, and certain religious symbols that connote the creation of the universe. A number of medieval cities, not to mention post-modern ones, had their foundations patterned after the Mandala, the Buddhist or Hindu graphic symbol that represents the Universe. Mandala is a Sanskrit word that means "circle"; however, in the area of religious practices and psychological studies it denotes circular images. Often these graphics contain a quaternity, or a multiple of four, in the form of, among other things, a cross, a star, or a square. The prototype of this medieval city was, of course, the Heavenly Jerusalem, that had a square ground plan within and surrounding walls with twelve gates that separated it from the profane space outside. This "squaring of the circle" is what Jung has called the "archetype of wholeness." Because of that significance, the "quaternity of One" has been the schema for all the images of God, as depicted in the visions of

Ezekiel, Daniel, and Enoch. The Mandalian plan was a transformation of the city into an orderly Universe, a sacred place bounded by its sacred center to the outer world.

It can be seen that every football bowl or stadium is essentially in structure, but, by connecting the points of oppositional and diagonal entrances, one not only sees a collection of inter-connecting triangles, called Yantras (that are the union of opposites), but also a collection of diagonal lines that, not so coincidentally, intersect at midfield, which is the original point for the creation ritual itself. Eliade has written in *The Sacred and the Profane* that the creation of the world is the example for all other constructions. Every town, dwelling, building (or in our case stadium) stands at the Center of the World so that its construction is only possible by means of not only abolishing profane space and time, but establishing sacred space and time. By its very nature, sacred time is reversible in the sense that it is actually a primordial mythical time that is made present. Every sacred event, then, represents the reaffirmation of a sacred event that took place in a mythical past, that is.... In The Beginning. In such a way, sacred time is infinitely recoverable and repeatable. It neither changes nor is exhausted. With every football game that is played, the participants rediscover that same sacred time. It is the time that was created and sanctified by the gods at the period of their birth, of which the game is precisely the reaffirmation. This is seen game and game again, season in season out. The stadium lives for the team and the team is immortal. Although the players graduate, get injured, quit, retire, or are fired, the team lives on. In other words, the city in which the team resides is irrelevant. Whether the Rams move from Cleveland to Los Angeles to St. Louis or the Cardinals move from Chicago to St. Louis to Phoenix does, in no way, reduce the fact that the team is still the "Rams" or the "Cardinals" and as such the ritual is constantly repeated ad infinitum. The "Oilers" still exist, but are now the "Titans" in Tennessee since one was hard-pressed to say there's much oil there and the "Raiders" still exist even though they're not sure in what city they belong. And probably the most ludicrous move envisioned is that of the Vikings moving from Minnesota to San Antonio. San Antonio Vikings? There is nothing on the uniform that would indicate a change of venue; to the contrary the significant totems, colors, etc. all tend to remain the same. All things, then, are interrelational: The stadium, the fans, the players, the coaches, even the game itself, live for one thing only: The ritual. And the ritual exists solely in order to sanctify the creation of the universe that would lead us to.

Cheerleaders, Mascots, and the Tossing of the Coin: Fertility, Animal Worship, the Sacred Center, and Sacred Land

Once one has purchased an object of participation and has entered a sacred place that will be the stage for a timeless ritual that will eventually celebrate the creation of the universe, we can see how the other rites fit into the overall organization of the ritual. As for the female cheerleaders (who have historically been the focus of the rite long before laws dealing with sexual discrimination allowed men into the "mystical fraternity of cheerleading" and who are still the pervasive sexual object in professional football), they can best be explained in light of fertility. Woman has been mystically held to be one with the earth, and the concept of Earth-Mother as the inexhaustible source of fecundity is probably as ancient as myth itself. The inter-relationship among woman, the soil, and fertility and their association with the entire creative structure of the game seems apparent. Their presence is, in one sense, representative of the entire creative act that is being carried out, while in another sense, they are motivators of the creative act. In some early Greek cults, the fertility of woman was seen as a profoundly mysterious inner process withheld from man. By elevating the warlike, death-dealing male to the consciousness of the creation of life, woman opened a path to the metaphysical roots of man's being. By ideal extension, female cheerleaders do the same thing: They ostensibly encourage, motivate, and support the men to continue the creative act (no matter how often they are ignored) while at the same time representing it.

Likewise, animal and vegetable symbols act in much the same manner. Although there are some exceptions, the most predominant team totems are of animals, vegetation, or alternative aspects of nature. For example, nine of the Pac-Ten teams have either animals or other natural aspects as their totem; as are nine of the Big Ten (that is actually the Big Eleven in search of

Twelve to make a dozen ten). Animal symbols show how vital it is for man to integrate into his life the symbol's psychic content, namely, instinct. Animals are neither good nor evil, they are a selection of nature and cannot desire anything not a part of it, and therefore they obey their instincts. The parallel in human life is simple: The foundation of human nature is instinct and animal mascots fulfill that need. The use of Indian totems as in Chief Illiniwek at Illinois or Seminoles at Florida State are, presumably, meant to be "homages" to Indian culture; however, since the use of Indian mascots in no way is a genuine representation of Indian culture nor can it be construed in any way as an homage to the same, the misuse of Indians only tends to undermine the symbol and modifies the mascot into a kind of commodity with a certain amount of use-value for a consumer. Vegetation too is symbolic of fertility and rebirth, and would, obviously, be the stage upon which the ritual would be carried out. For it too is symbolic of creation. The immediate question arises: "But what about artificial turf?" Ironically, even in its attempt to alter the natural aspect of the ritual, technology has only emphasized the symbol of the field as a place of perpetual rebirth since it always remains green in spite of seasonal variation and cosmic as the term "astro" would imply. But clearly the most important rite is the meeting of the teams at midfield since it is crucial to the entire ritual because the teams could actually meet anywhere: The sidelines, the end zone, the locker room. Actually, the entire rite could be obviated over the phone, through e-mail, a fax. But it isn't. They meet at the fifty yard-line, and in the middle of the field. The significance of meeting there may seem obvious at first, but its relevance in relation to sacred ritual bears attention since the question begs itself: Why the fifty? The symbolism of the center has been, from archaic societies onward, representative of a sacred place. As Eliade writes, "From all that has been said, it follows that the true world is always in the middle, at the Center, for it is here that there is a break in plane and hence communication among the three cosmic zones. Whatever the extent of the territory involved, the cosmos that it represents is always perfect" (*Sacred* 42). In accordance with the creation of the universe, the center has been called the "zone of absolute reality." Not only were the "Tree of Life" and the "Fountain of Youth" both situated at a center, but the universe itself was considered to have begun at a center; therefore, the significance of meeting and tossing the coin at midfield, especially in light of the Mandalian organization of the stadium, becomes apparent: is a sacred rite that consecrates the ground and divides the sacred territories upon which the ritual will be played. Through the coin toss itself, the life forces (home team) and the death forces (visiting team) -- depending on whom one "roots" for, a rhizome of cosmic proportions -- are situated and the ground become consecrated through its transformation into a center. Just as the time of any ritual coincides with the mythical time of the "beginning," every consecrated space coincides with the Center of the World.

Using a coin rather than a cap or a button is obvious: Coin is the means by which capitalized cultures exist, it is that which maintains subsistence. In American culture one could hardly exist without utilizing this device that we pass for our food, our gas, and even for the object of participation. Since every creation repeats, in its own way the creation of the universe and the world, and since whatever is founded has its foundation at the Center of the World, it is only natural that this rite be enacted, with a symbol of subsistence and exchange, and at midfield. The designation of the goals is simply the designation of the territories each team will defend. In certain semi-civilized tribes, territory was defined by natural landmarks: A rock ring, whose presence at that spot had been sanctified by rites of consecration. When boundaries were placed, the group took possession of it in such a religious way that a stranger who set foot on it committed a sacrilege analogous to a profane person's entrance into any other sacred area. The comparisons here seem apparent, as any fan, coach, or defensive safety knows when the opposing team crosses the fifty-yard line: "They're on my land." In addition to the sacred areas there were, what anthropologist Arnold van Gennep has called, "neutral zones": "Because of the pivoting of sacredness the territories on either side of the neutral zone were sacred in relation to whomever was in the zone, but the zone, in turn, was sacred for the inhabitants of the adjoining territories. The transition, then, from one zone to another was movement between two sacred worlds." The parallel with football is apparent. Each territory on either side of the "mystical fifty" is sacred. Granted, the defense is supposed to defend one-hundred yards if it has to, but as teams often find

out, the hardest yard to take is often the one at the goal line. One need only ask someone like John Randle or Bruce Smith or Kevin Greene about that. In football, the neutral zone is the fifty yard-line since it is the only yard marker that belongs to neither team, but to both; and any victory over the intruder is a victory over "chaos" and a triumph for "harmony" that leads one to.

The Game as Life versus Death, Harmony over Chaos and Creation

Once the pre-game rites have been concluded, the territories have been established, the ground is consecrated twice: Once by the coin toss and again by the playing of the National Anthem that, being a political instrument, would have no apparent reason for being played except in relation to the inferences one can draw from the rites within the ritual itself (i.e., war, patriotism, victory). It is only after all the pre-game rites are concluded that the participants are prepared for the game. The players (warriors) huddle with the coach (chief) for last minute suggestions on how to defeat the other team (death). Then the ritual begins in earnest. It has been suggested (and has obviously been taken seriously since many "chiefs" have been dethroned) that the object of the game is winning. That's partially true; however, the real object of the game is to create a score. Winning is another part of the ritual. Obviously scores don't come about in *illo tempore*. What one sees on the field is the execution of a quantity of plays all designed to create a score. It looks as if they plays are chaotic, and that is one of the marvelous paradoxes of the game; for the plays, though appearing chaotic, are not, and, executed in the proper way, should produce harmony.

The idea of creating harmony out of chaos is not only one of the principle theories behind the physical creation of the universe, is also a main theory behind certain religious conceptions of the creation of the universe as well. This is a simple yet profound idea: Nothing that has existed, exists, or will exist on this or any other planet could be different from that which has existed, exists, or will exist in the universe. Being part of and separate from the universe should make that readily apparent. The religious axiom (as symbolized in Solomon's Seal) that "as above, so below" stands beyond scrutiny, whether it be astrophysics or football. The main concept behind football is to create a play that, upon proper execution of the apparently chaotic parts, will create harmony. In other words, points. As any student of the game knows, points are not given for scoring, but for execution, for creating situations that will lead to a touchdown, a field goal, or a safety. Fumbles, interceptions, blocked punts, et cetera are no different since they contribute to the offensive harmony of the game. The defense plans on keeping the score away from their zone. They are fighting against death: A score is life for one team, and death for the other. If the defense "rises to the occasion" or "plays to its potential," it robs death of a victory and gives "life to the offense." These football clichés as well as others like "new life," "second life," "aren't dead yet," and "sudden death," are significant phrases in light of the ritualistic creative aspect of the game; for every idea of renewal, of restoring what once was, at whatever level of the game or ritual, can be traced back to the notion of birth and that to the notion of the creation of the universe. Without getting into the symbolism of the numbers used in the game (though it hardly seems coincidental that the players who are generally in control of the ball [life] all have numbers that reach or approach the Number One) it should be apparent by now that football is a creation ritual like other sports, abundant in births and deaths. Each kickoff is a birth, each punt a death. Each touchdown, field goal, or safety is both a birth for one team and a death for the other, and each rebirth gives a team the potential to create points. Each game is a game of life and death and each component of the game is likewise. Each game offers the opportunity for rebirth as does each season. One dies to one mode of being in order to attain another. Death constitutes an abrupt change of being and at the same time is a rite of passage or initiation. But what is that rite of passage in football? One might say, winning. But what is actually won? The game, of course, but that is not what is genuinely important. What is of ultimate importance is being #1. The connotation of being #1 seems simple, but based on ritual, rather than on an arbitrary selection by wire service reporters or "chiefs," it becomes much more significant since being #1 is equal to attaining Godhood.

The Bowls and the Ritual of Spring / The New Year and Attainment of Godhood

In the days before the bowls became over-valued, commodified relationship to football and by television stations to charge out-of-the-world advertising rates, before the bowls became so diffuse that the talent level became almost insignificant, before winning a minimum of six games

meant an invitation to one of these meaningless events, finishing #l in a division or league was an honor that qualified a team to participate in a major Bowl Game. The four oldest and most venerable bowl games (though currently not necessarily the most hyped) Rose, Orange, Sugar, and Cotton, all had two things in common: They have as their titles, objects of vegetation and they all occur on or about New Year's Day (the commercialization of these bowls doesn't take away from the ritual only mitigates their sanctity). One could say that those occurrences are merely coincidental, though if they are, they are remarkably so. Football season begins at or about the harvest and, for all significant purposes, ends, except for the Super Bowl, on New Year's Day. The combination of eight of the best teams in the country, playing in four "vegetative" bowl games, on the day that celebrates the New Year, and in warm climates (which itself implies the return of Spring and rebirth) is more than coincidental. It is a direct imitation of the archaic rituals that not only acknowledged the New Year as the harbinger of Spring, but also validated the culmination of an association with the godhead. New Year is a reactualization of the creation of the universe. It implies starting time over again, at the beginning; that is, it restores the original pristine time that existed at the outset of the creation. By celebrating the periodic regeneration of time through the New Year, it presupposes a new creation, a reproduction of the creative act. In primitive New Year rites several items were usually prevalent: A goddess, vegetation, totems, animals, and priests. The presence of a goddess (e.g., a Rose Bowl Queen) beside a plant symbol (e.g., a rose) confirmed one meaning in archaic myth: That of being an inexhaustible source of fecundity. That floral motifs are harmonized with other plant and feminine motifs is due to the central idea of an inexhaustible creation and that they play such a major portion in the bowls (i.e., parades) only reinforces that notion.

All associations in myth are not the result of chance, or without a certain metaphysical significance. As Eliade has written, they mean that here is the "center of the world, here is the source of life, youth, and immortality" (*Sacred* 43). Trees and plants signify that the Universe is in constant regeneration and the Queen personifies this limitless source of Creation as the ultimate basis of all reality. Vegetation is not entirely symbolic of the rebirth of Spring, but of the revivification of life as well. Through the symbolism of the animals or mascots, it can be briefly noted that totems, or team symbols, are everywhere apparent. If not on the field itself, they can be seen on banners, pennants, hats, sweatshirts and any other paraphernalia. The presence of the clergy doesn't seem to be as important in these rituals as in others; however, many of the bowl games do, in fact, have a priest or rabbi say a blessing prior to the beginning of the game that, in an additional way, re-sanctifies both the ground and the game (for a third time) and, likewise, acts as a religious homage to the Creator. With all that in mind, the fact that the Bowl games should come on or around the New Year is a stroke of archetypal genius rather than coincidence. On what better day could a team celebrate the attainment to godhood than on a day that is itself symbolic of the regeneration of life and of a new creation? They are the penultimate creation rituals being played on the ultimate creation day. The New Year regenerates what Eliade has called the "myth of the eternal return," the pattern of repetition of a gesture projected upon all human and cosmic planes. The cyclical structure of time is regenerated at each new birth. Everything begins over again at its commencement. The Bowls (even the "new" #1 Sugar Bowl) tend to harmonize the entire football ritual: They bring together the creation rites within the game itself, on a day that represents the rebirth of time and creation, with symbols that reaffirm that same notion of creation. Everything is interrelated and they all unite to revivify and verify the creation of the universe. Only one other major game remains; and it, by nature of its status in the game of football, makes itself the ultimate expression of the ritual. The fact that the number of Bowls has increased to the point they are beginning to lose their "mystical majesty" is due solely to the influx of corporate greed. But even the commodification of the college Bowl games does little to marginalize the approximate time of the year in which they Bowls are performed.

There is actually little to say about the ritual of the Super Bowl since it is an extension of all other football rituals. By virtue of its rank (by definition, "super" meaning over, above) among all the other Bowls, it has become the ultimate expression of the ritual; but no matter what its status, the ritual is played exactly the same way and no amount of media hype can alter that. The

difference is, of course, that the winner of that bowl is truly the #l of all other Number Ones. It has become the ultimate Bowl Game and as such no name other than Super could possibly be countenanced. The fact that it has most recently been "allowed" to take place in domed stadia does not preclude its essentially sacred purpose since to move from warm-climate outdoor stadia to climate-controlled indoor stadia (e.g., Detroit, Minneapolis, St. Louis) for the purpose of economic gain has little to do with the order of the cosmos. And even those moves, regardless of Michigan, Minnesota or Missouri hospitality, have not been embraced with enduring commercial acceptance. Because of its ultimate purpose (the "game of games" presumably between the "two best football teams in the world," although the "worldliness" is merely a hegemonic device since it's not seriously played anywhere else outside North America), the Super Bowl makes any place and any day sacred, as it is the ultimate manifestation of the creation of the universe; for the victor is truly the one without a second, except for the one to whom the game is honored and for whom the game is played. It is not coincidental, then that the gesture for being Number One, also points heavenward. Because of the fact that no one points downward, the "heavenly" significance of the gesture should be obvious. Every year, like an eternal return, we hear the "joke" that changes with the teams, but invariably stays the same that God plays for the St. Louis Rams or kicks field goals for the Vikings or used to recruit for Notre Dame or coaches at Michigan; however, in light of the apparent fact that football is not merely a game, but an homage to both God and the creation, to the human spirit, the "joke" is that the joke is probably much closer to the truth of being than most anyone might want to believe.

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Author's Profile: Mark Axelrod teaches English and comparative literature at Chapman University, Orange, California. Director of the John Fowles Center for Creative Writing, he is a two-time recipient of the United Kingdom Leverhulme Fellowship for Creative Writing. An author of four novels to date -- *Capital Castles* (Pacific Writers Press, 2000), *Cloud Castles* (Pacific Writers Press, 1998), *Cardboard Castles* (Pacific Writers Press, 1996), and *Bombay California* (Pacific Writers Press, 1994) -- Axelrod is working on a new novel entitled, *The Posthumous Memoirs of Blase Kubash*, a story based on a text by Machado de Assis. Awards he has won for his fiction include the Tim McGinnis Award, the Camargo Foundation Fellowship in Fiction Writing (twice), the Maxwell Perkins Award for Fiction Writing, the Bush Foundation Fellowship for Fiction Writing, and the Indiana University Award for Experimental Writing. His numerous publications in scholarship include *The Politics of Style in the Fiction of Balzac, Beckett and Cortázar* (St. Martin's Press, 1992), *The Poetics of Novels* (Macmillan, 1999), and *Aspects of the Screenplay* (Heinemann, 2001), and he is working on a new book entitled *Mismatch Dissolve: The Adaptation of Postmodern Fiction to Film*. He is a practicing screenwriter and has been awarded for his work by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, the Writers Guild of America, East, the Screenwriters Forum (University of Wisconsin), and the Sundance Institute. E-mail: <axelrod@chapman.edu>.