Christian Spirit of the Olympics Faces Major Challenge in Tokyo

The Olympic Games originated in ancient Greece in the eighth century B.C. They occurred every four years during a religious festival and featured religious celebrations.

In times of war, priests would offer sacrifices to the gods. The games honored the Greek god Zeus, the king of the gods of Mount Olympus. His symbols exuded strength and included the thunderbolt, eagle, bull and oak tree. His statue demanded much respect.

The originators of the games adopted the designation “Olympic” to reflect the name of the sacred site where the games took place; the site was located near the western coast of a peninsula in southern Greece.

Even the earliest games involved what modern society would refer to as discrimination. Married women could not participate in or even watch the Games; unmarried women could attend the competition. Unmarred girls were reportedly allowed to take part only in a festival honoring the wife of Zeus.

Only freeborn Greek men who met the entrance criteria could join the events. An Olympic Truce concluded during a particular series of events ensured the safety of the male participants and enabled them to travel safely from their cities to the sites where the games were being held.

The ancient games continued to intrigue the Greeks for more than a thousand years, but the increased influence of Christianity reduced the interest in the games according to author David C. Young, who wrote the book titled *A Brief History of the Olympic Games*.

As Rome became Christianized, the popularity of the Olympics decreased. The games were terminated in the fourth century when Emperor Theodosius mandated the elimination of all pagan festivals to strengthen the influence of Christianity, which had been adopted as Rome's state religion.

The games were revived in the late nineteenth century, and the first modern Olympics occurred in 1896 in Athens and featured more than 200 participants from 13 nations. The participants competed in 43 events.

Since their revival, the Olympics have expanded substantially; more than 200 National Olympic Committees have qualified for the Summer Games scheduled for 2021 in Tokyo. The National Olympic Committees of the qualified countries may send competitors to the games, regardless of their level of qualification.

Over the decades, however, the Olympics have become less popular in certain segments of society. U.S. TV viewership of the opening ceremonies of the Summer Olympics fell 11.4 million from 2012 to 2016. In February 2018, Sports Media Watch reported that the NBC network audience for the games was the smallest since 1992.

Attendance at the Tokyo Olympics will probably be considerably smaller than originally predicted because of the pandemic. The government of Japan has declared that overseas spectators cannot attend, and the number of Japanese spectators allowed to watch the games will be limited to around 10,000.

Not only is reduced attendance hovering over the Tokyo Games, politics and a significant faith-based issue are exerting influence. In an article published by *The Conversation*, an independent charity, professor Mark Wilson of Michigan State University reported that a recent poll revealed some 83% of the Japanese public wanted the upcoming Tokyo Summer Olympics to be cancelled. Thousands of Tokyo doctors and Japanese

business leaders expressed negative opinions about the games.

The International Olympic Committee has declared its support of LGBT participation in the Games, and "'a record 9 trans athletes are aiming for the Tokyo Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games." Over 100 Japanese groups have urged Japan's Prime Minister Suga to ensure equality for LGBT participants in the upcoming Olympics by passing an anti-discrimination law before the games begin. According to Ken Schultz, "President Biden's pro-gay rights executive order offers federal support for trans athletes" and definite support for LGBT participation in the upcoming Tokyo Olympic Games.

Meanwhile, in July 2020, the independent publication of Adventist Forum titled *Spectrum Magazine* announced five Christian athletes would participate in the upcoming Games. Two of the five have had to drop out of the competition, but three remain ready to participate and likely share their Christian faith.

A virtual mission trip arranged by the International Mission Board and Mobilize Japan partnership hopes to further the Great Commission in Japan during the Olympic Games. The IMB operates as an affiliate of the Southern Baptist Convention; four graduates of Southwestern Baptist Seminary established Mobilize Japan. The partnership will offer three events each week through the end of July: "Training Tuesday, Mission Prayer Friday and Outreach Saturday." The partnership hopes to use "the Olympic spirit" to share the Christian gospel and Christian athletes' testimonies.

Conservative Christians, both the athletes and the missionary team, undoubtedly view the Tokyo Summer Olympics as a means of sharing the Christian gospel with non-believers. Religious liberals and nonbelievers may, on the other hand, completely, or in part, reject any attempt to associate faith and athletics.

They may focus on the adoption of an LGBT equality act in Japan before the games. Prayer is needed to increase the possibility of spiritually inspired games. {eoa}

Franklin T. Burroughs *was awarded a Nishan-e-Homayoun by Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi for his work in the Iranian Ministry of Court and has received certificates of recognition from the California Senate and State Assembly. He is a member of the adjunct faculty of John F. Kennedy University and has served as president of Armstrong University and interim dean of the School of Business at Notre Dame de Namur University. He has taught at the University of California at Berkeley. He has been the managing director of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in Iran and has served as consultant to the Ford Foundation, UNESCO, the U.S. Department of Commerce and the government of Iran. He has also been visiting scientist at the U.S. Department of Energy. He serves as an English language officer (contractor) with the U.S. Department of State. Dr. Burroughs serves as an international consultant in education, Middle East affairs and cultural diplomacy.*

Read articles like this one and other Spirit-led content in our new platform, CHARISMA PLUS.