

For NBA teams, religion can be unifying or divisive

by [Sam Amick](#)

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(RNS) Long before head coach Doc Rivers found himself defending his Los Angeles Clippers players who were the unwelcome participants in team owner Donald Sterling's racist comments all week, he was concerned about another sensitive subject: religion.

It was late 1999, the start of Rivers' first season as coach of the Orlando Magic, and he saw a situation in the locker room that he felt needed to be addressed.

As his players took part in the pregame prayer that was part of their routine, Rivers noticed something he didn't like.

"I looked up in one of the prayers, and Tariq [Abdul-Wahad] had his arms folded, and you could see that he was really uncomfortable with it," Rivers said. "So the next game, we were standing up in a circle, and I said, 'Hey guys, we're no longer praying.'"

Rivers calls himself a "very religious" man, having grown up in the Second Baptist Church in Maywood, Ill., and praying on his knees every night in his home to this day. But he prefers to practice privately and is quick to note that he has attended church only for funerals the past 15 years.

So, that day, he decided his teams would keep their religious practices private as well.

"We're no longer praying," Rivers recalled saying to his team. "I want to take a minute. Everybody close their eyes. We all can have different religions, we have different Gods, we can just take a minute to compose. If you guys want to pray individually, you can do it. If you want to meditate, do whatever you want."

"Then, after that game, Tariq Abdul-Wahad walks in to me, gives me a hug with his eyes tearing, and said: 'Thank you. That is so important to me. No one has ever

respected my [Muslim] religion.' He said, 'I'm going to give you everything I've got.'"

This NBA season has been unprecedented when it comes to the blending of basketball and unresolved social issues: with Jason Collins becoming the first openly gay athlete to play in a major professional league; Royce White, who has dealt with mental illness; and the Sterling situation. There has been a widespread push for increased tolerance on all fronts. Yet the conversation about religion and how it's best handled by coaches and players remains fluid.

With Rivers handling his work world one way and Mark Jackson—Golden State Warriors coach and ordained minister—another, there's no better sign of the breadth of this debate than this particular series.

After all, their growing rivalry reached this point in part because of an Oct. 31 controversy over pregame chapel and the Clippers' decision to break league tradition and force the Warriors to pray on their own.

Jackson's strong Christian beliefs and practices are well-chronicled: The former All-Star point guard who found God later in life and has perhaps the most devout locker room in the league sees great value in sharing his spirituality with his players.

This has been the case since the start of his time as coach in 2011. But it was never more obvious than the recent Easter Sunday, when eight of his 15 players made the 18-mile trek from their Beverly Hills hotel, through Los Angeles traffic on the team bus, to Jackson's nondenominational church in Van Nuys, California, then on to practice at UCLA. A second bus to the practice site had been arranged for those who didn't want to attend church.

Jackson is hardly alone when it comes to mixing religion and rims. Monty Williams, who coaches Rivers' son, Austin, has integrated the two in his own way since becoming the New Orleans Pelicans' coach in 2010. Stars such as the Oklahoma City Thunder's Kevin Durant, the Houston Rockets' Dwight Howard and the Warriors' Stephen Curry are vocal about their beliefs and quick to praise God in interviews with the media.

Every arena in the NBA has a room reserved for pregame chapel in which interested players on both teams can, save for the Clippers' outlier, take part at the same time. The Thunder even have a pregame invocation at center court of Chesapeake Energy Arena, in which a nondenominational prayer is given, though they are the only team

to have such a practice.

According to *The New York Times*, those delivering the pregame prayer have ranged from Protestants to Roman Catholics to rabbis to Native American spiritual leaders. The report indicated that the Thunder and the NFL's Carolina Panthers are the only ones among the 141 North American men's professional teams to do so (MLB, NFL, NBA, NHL, and MLS).

Mark Jackson also cites Phil Jackson, the legendary coach with the "Zen Master" nickname whose spiritual ways have been lauded by most throughout the years because of his unprecedented success. While his Buddhist beliefs are seen by many as more innocuous than the more-devout style of a Mark Jackson or a Williams, the 68-year-old who grew up with Pentecostal ministers as parents paints a different picture in his latest book, "Eleven Rings."

Before training camps with the Chicago Bulls and Los Angeles Lakers, Phil Jackson—who said he borrowed this technique from NFL coaching legend Vince Lombardi—would line his players up in a row on the baseline and say: "God has ordained me to coach you young men, and I embrace the role I've been given. If you wish to accept the game I embrace and follow my coaching as a sign of your commitment, step across that line."

Former Lakers small forward Matt Barnes, now with the Clippers, said Phil Jackson's baseline ritual was no longer in use by the time he played for him in the 2010-11 season that was his last as a coach. But the meditation sessions that were always a part of Jackson's routine, he said, were still in full effect.

"I think the main thing I took from Phil was just to relax and clear your mind," said Barnes, who noted that those Lakers would meditate three or four times a month with the lights turned off in the team's film room. "It was really just to sit back, relax, have good posture and just breathe. Have some incense sometimes. Just silence. Just sit back and breathe, and be in touch with your mind and your soul."

"I think guys bought in because of what [Jackson's] record showed. But I really don't think to force anything [is good], whether it's a religion or a point of view. Like I said, Phil's thing was never forced."

Mark Jackson cited the two buses on Easter Sunday as an example of how he always respects others' beliefs, and he said players who don't share his worldview need not

fear for their playing time or worry about their role on his team. But Jackson clearly sees his spirituality as a way to inspire his co-workers and gets excited when he speaks of having a positive influence on others.

Jackson said he has never had a player express concerns. "I am who I am, so I think people make more of it than it is," he said. "I'm not coach, pastor, husband, father, son—when you see me, you see all. So I don't separate them. But I'm respectful to everybody."

As is Rivers, who simply chooses to go with a different style.

"If it's 75 percent [who believe one way], that's to me 25 percent" that don't, Rivers said. "To me, if it's 95 percent, the 5 percent deserve the same treatment as everybody else. And I just think that's what we need to do. If it was church, then that's different. This is not church. This is our jobs. So our jobs come first, respect comes second, and I think that's the way it should be."