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Publication Date

2022

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

Nation Beautiful: Muscular Christianity and the Quest for Perfection

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Religious Studies

by

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September 2022

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Just as construction of the Panama Canal began, local businessman Reuben B. Hale started a campaign in order to convince local elite and community leaders that the Canal's grand exhibition should take place in San Francisco.¹ Hale not only envisioned San Francisco as the ideal city for the Canal's grandiose reveal, but an ideal city in itself. His "City Beautiful" project emphasized San Francisco's unique terrain while advocating for the physical construction of the best architectural features of East Coast cities. Hale's efforts soon caught the attention of the local bourgeoisie, and city planner Daniel Burnham was asked to craft a blueprint of the utopian city. Yet, planning of "City Beautiful" was immediately cut short as the Great 1906 Earthquake devastated San Francisco.²

After the great earthquake, the top priority immediately shifted to rebuilding the city's economy. Yet, local elites and government officials still pursued Hale's original task of crafting a grand exhibition that would encompass a celebratory spirit of U.S. imperialism. In 1909, twenty businessmen formed a board of directors for the prospective Panama-Pacific International Exposition (PPIE) and by 1910 Congress approved the PPIE.³ After an immense amount of preparation, the PPIE opened its doors on February 20th, 1915, and invited guests from around the world to gaze upon classical Greco-Roman inspired imagery, as well as enjoy the fair's games and attractions in the

¹ Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America*, 2nd edition (Oakland: University California Press, 2016), 33-34.

² Ibid, 33-34.

³ Ibid, 34.

PPIE's "Joy Zone," which mainly highlighted xenophobic and racist caricatures of immigrants and persons of non-Aryan descent.

Initially inspired by the idea of *total* perfection for San Francisco, failing to actualize "City Beautiful," while still harboring a sense of utopia within physically made spaces exemplifies Muscular Christianity's own quest for perfection. Muscular Christianity (1880-1920), "a movement emphasizing rigorous physical training for the good of men's souls"⁴ was not an organized religion but rather a social movement attempting to realize its utopian vision of "Nation Beautiful." Like Hale, muscular Christians attempted to achieve the same initial goal of realizing *total* utopia through a material and ideal sense. Similar to how Hale encouraged human intervention to make his vision of an ideal San Francisco a reality, muscular Christians began cultivating both physical and spiritual spaces for worship and exercise that fulfilled a peculiar nostalgic utopianism of a seemingly Aryan⁵ past. Yet, like the PPIE board, many muscular Christians recognized the impossibility of realizing *total* utopia, in which urbanization could somehow revert back to rural modes of social relations within an increasingly

⁴ Annie Blazer, "Religion and Sports in America," *Religion Compass* 6, no. 5 (May 2012): 289.

⁵ "Aryan" refers to the ancient Sanskrit term, *arya*, meaning "noble" and of "good family lineage." Since its first reference by Arthur de Gobineau in 1853, Aryan refers to a supposed superiority of white northern European populations due to their connections with the language and/or race of ancient Indo-Europeans. Near the end of the long-nineteenth century, Aryan also referred to a seeming superiority of northern European populations due to their connection with ancient civilizations like Greece and Rome (many affluent scholars believed that the Indo-European ancients directly influenced the rising power of such ancient civilizations). By the early twentieth century, Aryan became synonymous with *nordic*, meaning the superiority of populations from northwestern Europe, and throughout the Progressive era Aryan shared a similar meaning with the phrase, Anglo (-Saxon Americans), due to a shared belief in the superiority of white northern Europeans. For more information see: Ruth Clifford Engs, *The Eugenics Movement: An Encyclopedia* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 2005).

industrialized nation, thus shifting their main focus to the mere *approach* of utopia within their own spaces. Near the movement's end, muscular Christians no longer deemed industrialization and related "social crises" as severe as they originally thought, and openly embraced such social conditions in their distorted vision of utopia.

As muscular Christianity's ambition of fully realizing utopia by changing some material conditions became primarily about approaching utopia, why did most muscular Christians change their perceptions of the supposed social crises as something much less dire by muscular Christianity's end? In other words, with muscular Christianity's growing internal contention, why did many muscular Christians change their disposition toward American society as something that needed to be transformed from morally bankrupt to good, to merely a bettering of American society?

To begin this investigation, it is important to realize that muscular Christianity did not endure in isolation, and that a number of external influences shaped the muscular Christian's change of perception. I will briefly consider how the American eugenics and progressive movements, which began around the same time as muscular Christianity's peak in popularity, seemingly improved muscular Christianity's initial social crises specifically through their changing emphasis from theory to policy implementation. But as a parameter for this paper, I will mainly examine the particular: the individual muscular Christian's approach to utopia. I will closely analyze the speeches and writings of prominent muscular Christians, such as Methodist bishop Dr. Cyrus D. Foss, in tandem with unknown authors' published articles, giving special attention to their interpretations

of religious experience and their appreciation for muscular Christianity. I will also frame the muscular Christian's approach to utopia as a particular manifestation of William James' theory of religious experience of healthy-mindedness. Finally, I will consider religious studies scholar Annie Blazer's three major shifts of muscular Christianity. I will elaborate on the first two phases in specific regards to muscular Christianity's quest for perfection and evaluate the applicability of the third and final phase to the muscular Christian's approach to utopia.

Through critical examination of muscular Christianity's quest for perfection - i.e. the attempt to achieve both physical and spiritual perfection through worship, exercise, and additional measures - I argue that despite the muscular Christian's inability to change social conditions during his mere approach to utopia, the purported social crises that motivated the start of muscular Christianity seemed much less dire because through his approach to utopia the muscular Christian realized that his physical body and space for worship and exercise were a crucial part of God's reality. In the perfect harmony between the material and ideal, the only indispensable existences were white Protestant men and God whose importance spanned greatly beyond the social crises he was initially concerned about. Societal relations subsided in relevancy and paled in comparison to the muscular Christian's body and his cultivated space as necessary parts for God's reality. The muscular Christian's particular religious experience of healthy-mindedness did not intentionally ignore the purported social crises of the outside world, rather the significance of such social conditions was belittled to something much less grand than his

religious experience. As James claims of the healthy-minded religious experience, “and so far as you yourself are concerned at any rate, though the facts may still exist, their evil character exists no longer.”⁶

In the beginning of muscular Christianity, many white Protestant cisgendered men yearned for perfection that was once purportedly achieved by the Aryan race because they were discontented with urban social changes that they deemed as pervasive in the U.S. For Luther Gulick, a prominent political scientist, wealthy ancient Greeks once contrived a sense of utopia through their serious commitment to physical health during their time of recreation.⁷ For steadily rising politician Theodore Roosevelt perfection was once achieved by rural American Civil War soldiers.⁸

Though muscular Christians were inspired by different fantasies of pre-urbanized utopias, certain eugenic theories recognized the importance of both the white male body and his environment. The concept of the white noble savage, in which moral ethics derived from man’s innate instincts and were encouraged by a surrounding natural environment,⁹ acknowledged both bodily exercise and surroundings of nature as necessities for white men’s proper development. The white noble savage was not a novel

⁶ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 89.

⁷ Luther H. Gulick, “Popular Recreation and Public Morality,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 34, no. 1 (July 1909): 33, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1011341>.

⁸ Theodore Roosevelt, “What We Can Expect of the American Boy,” *St. Nicholas* 27, no. 7 (May 1900), 572, <https://www.google.com/url?q=https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id%3Dmdp.39015081216015%26view%3D2up%26seq%3D20%26size%3D175&sa=D&ust=1588620817130000&usg=AFQjCNGTcTKjhKyvABjCoOBQ8ylPu9IKuQ>.

⁹ Donald K. Pickens, *Eugenics and The Progressives* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1968), 7. In his work, Pickens merely refers to the “noble savage” without specifically acknowledging such eugenics theory as exclusively pertaining to *white* men with Aryan connections.

idea as theorists of the Enlightenment had previously developed the concept,¹⁰ yet American eugenicists like Stanley G. Hall revamped the conceptualization of the white noble savage specifically through recapitulation theory: man's natural recapitulation of "anglo-Saxon ideals" during his own biological development.¹¹ These eugenic theories united muscular Christianity's vision of utopia in which the white noble savage could unleash his seemingly inherent primitiveness in a natural environment.

With the vaguely-defined term *action* as one of the most pivotal virtues for the movement, muscular Christians attempted to realize *total* utopia by transforming urban environments as literal and spiritual spaces for their total unleashing of supposedly innate noble savagery. In 1900, 466 local Young Men's Christian Associations (YMCAs) developed physical training programs across the U.S., and by 1916, such programming expanded to 911 local chapters.¹² Within their physically cultivated spaces, some muscular Christians emphasized their own physical exercise as a way to cultivate a surrounding natural environment in a spiritual sense. Other muscular Christians amplified certain virtues related to Christian masculinity in order to satisfy the white noble savage's need for a literal surrounding nature in a spiritual sense. As the unknown author of "Back to Nature" proclaims, with "Nature as the middle ground between God and man," obtaining a perfect sense of nature was in the feeling of nature, not in the literal

¹⁰ Ibid, pg 164.

¹¹ Thomas C. Leonard, *Illiberal Reformers: Race, Eugenics & American Economics in the Progressive Era* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 127-128

¹² David S. Churchill, "Making Broad Shoulders: Body-Building and Physical Culture in Chicago 1890-1920," *History of Education Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (Aug. 2008): 354.

observation alone.¹³ Without its literal presence, many muscular Christians focused on spiritually cultivating a sense of nature as a way to fulfill both of the white noble savage's necessities.

Nostalgic utopianism, the muscular Christian adoption of the white noble savage, initially served as a mental blueprint for muscular Christians to transform the perceived ungodly world into a total utopia. Yet, as muscular Christians confronted the contradiction between the merciless growth of industrialization and their goal to revert to a seemingly pre-urbanized past, they recalibrated the aim and scope of their goal for perfection.

As a synthesis, muscular Christians began to criticize a seeming excessive focus on materialism within society when they shifted focus to the mere *approach* of utopia - their particular religious experience of healthy-mindedness within their already cultivated space. In his monumental work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James alludes to this specific kind of religious experience:

We have now whole congregations whose preachers ... ignore or even deny eternal punishment, and insist on the dignity rather than on the depravity of man. They look at the continual preoccupation of the old-fashioned Christian with the salvation of his soul as something sickly and reprehensible rather than admirable; and a sanguine and 'muscular' attitude which to our forefathers would have seemed purely heathen, has become in their eyes an ideal element of Christian character.¹⁴

¹³ "Back to Nature," *The Outlook* 74, no. 6 (June 1903) 305, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=iau.31858033604194&view=2up&seq=316&size=150>.

¹⁴ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1905), 91.

The entire passage and James' specific mention of "'muscular' attitude" refers to the temperament of muscular Christians, with their "attitude" toward God's reality as something immanent within their own worship and physical exercise, rather than transcendent in a future and unidentified space. It was through healthy-mindedness that muscular Christians felt "the feeling of happiness which is connected with the nearness ... and most indispensable proof of God's reality."¹⁵ The muscular Christian neared God's reality through a sense of perfect harmony between the material (his own physical exercise within his own physically cultivated space) and the ideal (allocating an outside force within his spiritually cultivated space as the prime mover of the material).¹⁶

As some muscular Christians explicitly mention God in their writings, I sometimes refer to "God" as the Supreme Being in a generally Christian sense. Yet, many muscular Christians do not explicitly mention God in their speeches or writings, rather they vaguely imply an intangible outside force (that could possibly be God as the Supreme Being) that was inextricably connected with their souls and/or primal state of white noble savagery. Thus, I am primarily concerned with "God" as a celestial force that is not necessarily separable from the muscular Christian yet is still outside of his

¹⁵ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* 79.

¹⁶ The sense of being acted on by an "outside force" is one of four key components to James' idea of religious experience. The other three criteria involve ineffability - being unable to articulate the feeling of religious experience -, noesis - a feeling that the religious experience delivers knowledge or changes the person's perspective, and transience - the feeling of religious experience is temporary. For more information see: William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, and Shirl J. Hoffman, "Evangelicalism and the Revitalization of Religious Ritual in Sport," *Sport and Religion* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics Books, 1992).

conscious reach and drives the muscular Christian's physical cultivations of body and space.

Muscular Christianity reached a second major point of internal contention when muscular Christians could not agree on the degree of importance between ideal and material as well as the allocation of God in their religious experience. Some muscular Christians explicitly allocated God as the outside force with a blatant priority of the ideal over the material, yet many other muscular Christians did not explicitly allocate who/what was the outside force with an equal standing between the ideal and material. Unlike the movement's first significant disagreement among muscular Christians, this internal contention could not be resolved through the mere adoption of the white noble savage since the eugenics concept remained within the framework of "man" *himself* and subsequently allocated the vague outside force as the instincts of man.

With the growing professionalization of sports by the turn of the century, muscular Christians could not agree on whether or not participating in professional sports was a legitimate way of approaching utopia. Baseball athlete turned preacher, Billy Sunday, viewed the professionalization of sports as a mere perpetuation of modernism, a novel yet growing tradition of evangelicalism that seemingly stressed attributes related to muscular Christianity's initial social crises. Muscular Christians, like basketball inventor James Naismith, advocated that the professionalization of sport was a vital form of

Christian outreach¹⁷ as it appealed to the white noble savage, a continually central eugenics theory for many muscular Christians.

Near the movement's end, muscular Christianity reached a fourth and final point of internal contention relating to immigration. As certain marginalized groups "turned to sport as one method of demonstrating their ability to fit in American culture,"¹⁸ muscular Christians internally struggled with their initial stance on immigration as a supposed social crisis. For instance, leading YMCA member Howard B. Grose often oscillated between advocating for civic nationalism, fundamental equality for all humans, and racial nationalism, people bonded by common ancestry, skin color, and inherent ability to self-govern.¹⁹ Unlike previous points of internal contention, this internal struggle did not stay as mere disagreement *among* muscular Christians, but penetrated the individual political views of the muscular Christian *himself*.

The growing participation in muscular Christianity by certain marginalized groups and the internal contention within the muscular Christian himself marked a significant change for the movement. The muscular Christian's grave anxiety over the seeming social crises transformed into steadily accepting changing social conditions that remained under the control of the white Protestant middle-class. As muscular Christianity neared its end, the

¹⁷ Blazer, "Religion and Sport in America," 290-291.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 292.

¹⁹ Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 4.

Panama-Pacific International Exposition (PPIE) exemplified the muscular Christian's acceptance of changing social conditions. The xenophobic and racist caricatures of marginalized persons at the PPIE's "Joy Zone" demonstrated his willingness to include marginalized groups within his distorted vision of utopia, all while the PPIE's classical imagery exemplified his approach to utopia.

My research questions and subsequent argument primarily concern the muscular Christian whose religious experiences of healthy-mindedness involved an ambiguous outside force and posed an equal standing between the material and ideal. The aim of this paper is to further complicate Jamesian ideas of religious experience and begin examining explicit connections between muscular Christianity and external movements like early American eugenics and progressivism.

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Toward the end of the long nineteenth century, Victorian lifestyles, the seeming femininity of the public sphere, expeditious immigration rates, and rapid urbanization deeply perturbed many white Protestant men. This "nativist apocalypse," as historian Clifford Putney succinctly describes it, seemingly plagued the entire US.²⁰

Key Victorian activities that were deemed overtly feminine, like reading indoors, seemingly required the American people to leave "the realities of the earthly living" and consequently over-civilized them. Young white men were especially susceptible to a supposed overcivilization as they unknowingly denied their own body's intellectualism

²⁰ Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920* (Harvard University Press, 2001), 29.

when they attempted to become smarter mentally. For many muscular Christians this priority of the mind over the body was the root of emasculation that could lead to both mental and physical illnesses such as neurasthenia, a common medical diagnosis of nerve sickness during the long nineteenth century.²¹

Expeditious immigration rates and rapid urbanization troubled certain muscular Christians the most. According to Howard B. Grose, a prominent member of the YMCA, the heavy influx of immigrants was the “greatest American problem” as they seemingly tainted the nation’s most precious ideals and institutions.²² In his work, *Our Country*, Congregational minister Josiah Strong specifies that the non-Aryan European immigrant threatened the Anglo-Saxon’s “purest Christianity” and cautions the reader that the growing social vices within cities were brought on by such immigrants.²³ During the muscular Christian movement, Strong’s connection between immigration and degradation of cities was a common form of social darwinism. Yet, near the end of muscular Christianity, Grose’s caution toward immigration became a significant part of muscular Christianity’s perpetual state of internal content. By this point muscular Christians contemplated the severity of immigration *within* themselves.

In muscular Christianity’s first phase, “the establishment of muscular Christianity as a Protestant ideology,”²⁴ each muscular Christian expressed an intense disdain for a

²¹ Ibid, 26.

²² Howard B. Grose, “Association Men and Immigration,” *Association Men* 33, no. 1 (October 1907), 6.

²³ Josiah Strong, *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis* (New York: Baker & Taylor for the American Home Missionary Society, 1885), 222.

²⁴ Blazer, “Religion and Sport in America,” 290.

particular social crisis, yet they united through their motivation to combat the general nativist apocalypse. Certain members sought to achieve this goal within church walls, such as Theology Professor Norman Richardson who envisioned men's involvement with organized Protestantism as an unofficial brotherhood.²⁵ Yet, leading muscular Christians reminisced about particular versions of a supposed Aryan past in order to overcome the nativist apocalypse and begin realizing utopia in their present day.

For political scientist Luther Gulick, the wealthy few of Ancient Greece once created a sense of utopia through bodily exercise. Gulick ardently states:

The forms of our pleasure-seeking disclose what we really are. Those nations which devoted their leisure to re-creating health and building up beautiful bodies have tended to survive ... If it required only a small fraction of the people to immortalize Greece what marvels may not be done by us moderns now that all of us have a little time each day to devote to the expression of our real selves.²⁶

Gulick deeply admired the physical exercise of the wealthy ancient Greeks. He perceived their conscious decision to physically exercise during their recreation time not only as the foundation for Greece's legacy, but as a universal truth that could potentially be the key to unlocking utopia in the U.S..

For leading muscular Christians like President Theodore Roosevelt, they reminisced about rural environments during the Civil War era. In "What We can Expect of the American Boy," Roosevelt explains:

²⁵ Norman Richardson, *The Religion of Modern Manhood* (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1911), 127.

²⁶ Gulick, "Popular Recreation and Public Morality," 33.

In the Civil War the soldiers who came from the prairie and the backwoods and the rugged farms where stumps still dotted the clearings, and who had learned to ride in their infancy, to shoot as soon as they could handle a rifle, and to camp out whenever they got the chance, were better fitted for military work than any set of mere school or college athletes could possibly be ... The Greeks were famous athletes ... But it was a very bad thing when they kept up their athletic games while letting the stern qualities of soldiership and statesmanship sink into disuse.²⁷

Unlike Gulick who perceived bodily exercise as the foundational pillar for crafting a sense of perfection, Roosevelt emphasized that the body alone did not suffice in achieving perfection. For Roosevelt, there was also an invaluable importance to upbringings around a rural environment that scholarly athletes during his adulthood seemingly lacked. Roosevelt deeply yearned for a revitalization of a particular Civil War past that was once perfectly achieved by Civil War soldiers with rural upbringings.

The discrepancy between Gulick's and Roosevelt's criteria for realizing utopia demonstrates an immediate state of contention within muscular Christianity. Yet, such contention was quickly resolved through the theoretical adoption of the white noble savage. The early eugenics theory emphasized the need to fulfill *both* criteria, which became adopted by muscular Christians in order to begin realizing utopia as a united movement.

According to historian Donald E. Pickens, the white noble savage may be thought as a man "attuned to nature" while existing in "primeval innocence." His own instincts guided his decision making and made him much happier than a civilization that

²⁷ Roosevelt, "What We Can Expect of the American Boy," 572.

surrounded him with an unnatural habit that only promoted superficial development.²⁸

For American psychologist and leading muscular Christian Stanley G. Hall, only a male descendent of the Aryan race genetically possessed the proper animalistic instincts for decision making.²⁹

Specifically through recapitulation theory, Hall elaborates on his conceptualization of the white noble savage. In recapitulation theory, the white noble savage required a reconnection with Aryan virtues in order to fully develop into a white adult man. In other words, a biologically normal white man recapitulated his ancestor's evolutionary progress during his own biological development. As a baby he was a mere savage until fully evolving into a white noble savage with controllable instincts. Once a mature adult, the white noble savage recapitulated "ancient Saxon ideals,"³⁰ such as Gulick recapitulating the wealthy Ancient Greek's physical exercise during their leisure time, or Roosevelt recapitulating upbringings from a rural environment similar to the Civil War era. Specifically, through recapitulation theory, the white noble savage transformed both Gulick's wonderment and Roosevelt's reminiscence from mere yearnings to immediate necessities for white Protestant men's proper development. Muscular Christians eagerly adopted the framework as nostalgic utopianism to not only

²⁸ Pickens, *Eugenics and The Progressives*, 7.

²⁹ In his work, *Muscular Christianity*, Putney specifically refers to American psychologist Stanley G. Hall's view that it was only white men and boys (with an Aryan connection) that did not permanently remain in a primitive state. For more information see: Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 6.

³⁰ Leonard, *Illiberal Reformers*, 127-128.

realize their own evolutionary processes, but realize utopia in which white Protestant men and God's reality were the only indispensable existences.

During the 1905 inauguration at Wesleyan University, Dr. Cyrus D. Foss succinctly describes muscular Christianity's unique theoretical adoption of the white noble savage in the context of recapitulation theory. During his outward endorsement of muscular Christianity and reference to muscular Christians, Dr. Foss adamantly states:

Let him [the muscular Christian] leap into every day as into a new Paradise ... let him stretch away over the breezy hills, with fit companions, in utter forgetfulness of lessons and essays and sermons, until every drop of blood in his veins tingles with the delight of mere animal existence.³¹

With nostalgic utopianism firmly established as the white noble savage's need for bodily exercise and a surrounding nature, muscular Christians started cultivating physical and spiritual spaces to begin realizing *total* utopia. At the turn of the nineteenth century, over 1/3 of the YMCA's built gymnasiums to not only provide recreational alternatives to taverns seemingly pouring with vice, as religious studies scholar Scott Strednak Singer indicates,³² but for white Protestant men to properly harness their white noble savagery. Within such physical spaces, muscular Christians physically exercised in order to satisfy their need for bodily exercise. Muscular Christians also created spiritual spaces that

³¹ "School and College," *The Independent* 27, no. 1405 (Nov. 1875), 12. In his explicit endorsement of muscular Christianity, Dr. Foss's inaugural address "was a hearty protest against surface work in education and a hearty endorsement of muscular Christianity."

³² Scott D. Strednak Singer, "The Word Was Made Flesh: The Male Body in Sports Evangelism" (PhD diss., Temple University, 2016), 70.

encompassed a surrounding nature by either emphasizing their own physical exercise or amplifying particular Christian masculine virtues.

For the inventor of basketball, James Naismith, the muscular Christian physically exercised in order to divert his own mind from his immediate physical surroundings and create a spiritual space of a surrounding nature. While reflecting on his invention of basketball, Naismith asserts: “When the men engaged in these sports [football and baseball] went to the city to enter business and found that they had leisure time, it was only natural that they should look for some kind of athletic diversion.”³³ “Diversion” not only refers to basketball as Christian alternative to recreational vices within the city, but refers to what made sports within cities sufficient replacements for sports that embraced open fields of nature: a surrounding of nature as a spiritually spatial state through the muscular Christian’s own physical exercise. A sport like basketball was an athletic diversion in the sense that sport preoccupied the muscular Christian’s mind from a surrounding nature that was physically lacking and tapped into recapitulating the required surrounding nature in a spiritual way.

While alluding to the seemingly endless vice in the city, the unknown author of the article “Pluck and Poise as Christian Qualities” openly admires certain virtues related to Christian masculinity as ways to cultivate spiritual space of a surrounding nature. They assert:

... he [the Christian man] will not be ‘carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease,’ for he will discover that ceaseless struggle against evil influences and various discouragements will be his frequent portion and that he must

³³ Blazer, “Religion and Sports in America,” 291.

fight if he would win, beseeching the Lord to increase his courage by the way. The Kingdom of heaven is still taken by the spiritually mighty, and is seized and appropriated in no other way.³⁴

For this unknown author, courage and spiritual mightiness served as foundations for transforming society into a totally realized utopia, or “the Kingdom of heaven.” The cultivation of spiritual space did not come easily as “flowery beds of ease,” but required rugged and spiritual resiliency similarly to the rocky and harsh terrain of mountains.

Near the end of the movement’s first phase, “the establishment of muscular Christianity as a Protestant ideology,”³⁵ muscular Christians confronted the contradiction between their efforts to completely realize a pre-urbanized past and current industrialization that would not allow complete transformation of urbanized spaces into spaces for the white noble savage. As a synthesis, muscular Christians criticized the seemingly excessive focus on the material realm and prioritized their own unique approach to utopia - the harmony between the material (physical exercise of his body within his physically cultivated space) and the ideal (allocating an outside force within his spiritually cultivated space as the prime mover of the material).

In “The Beauty of the Lord our God,” the unknown author heavily criticizes materialism because of its roots in industry-driven imperialism and its destruction of a Christian ethos. They proclaim:

The stern, terrible materialism of this day - a materialism which builds battleships so that they are floating Gibralters, which forges cannon so that

³⁴ “Pluck and Poise as Christian Qualities,” *New York Observer and Chronicle (1833-1912)* 89, no. 25 (June 1911), 783.

³⁵ Blazer, “Religion and Sport in America,” 290.

they hurl tons of iron through the trackless sky, which calls into being an enginery a thousand times greater than our fathers ever dreamed of, and which demands strength and force above everything else - has reproduced itself in the religious life, so that beauty as a grace essential to Christian character, has now an inferior place in the thought and spirit of the age.³⁶

It may initially appear as though the author also contested muscular Christianity itself, since such “terrible materialism” included emphasis on muscular Christian qualities like strength and force. Yet, their critique on the material realm was actually a segue to discuss what they considered the most vital aspect for utopia: the ideal.

We forget that both strength and beauty belong to the sanctuary, and that man attains the truest and highest standard of life who has these virtues in harmonious relations. . . . Now, if the body is a mere shell, the husk, the wrapping of the soul, how much more important that beauty be developed in the life spiritual, and that we so live as to ‘adorn the doctrine of GOD our Saviour,’ not having the ‘doctrine’ hanging upon us as a golden chain or a precious jewel, but our life actually adding to the sweetness and beauty of ‘the Gospel of the grace of GOD . . . Surely the climax of human life and attainment is realized when, through that [spiritual] life, GOD is glorified!’”³⁷

The author blatantly prioritizes the ideal over the material during the harmonious connection between the ideal and material - i.e. the approach to utopia. The outside force was the sweetness and beauty of God that moved the physical body, “a mere shell.”

Yet, not all muscular Christians and enthusiasts of the movement agreed on the blatant prioritization of the ideal nor explicit mentions of God, the Supreme Being, as the outside force. As muscular Christians started concentrating on their own approach to utopia, many muscular Christians, like Dr. Foss, opted for an equal standing between the

³⁶ “The Beauty of the Lord Our God,” *Christian Advocate (1866-1905)* 73, no. 24 (Jun. 1898), 957

³⁷ *Ibid*, 957.

material and the ideal, and may have implicated God in an ambiguous sense. During his address to Wesleyan University students with an outward endorsement of muscular Christianity, Dr. Foss adamantly expresses:

It [the physical body] is the home, the instrument, the mold, and the eternal companion of his soul . . . Let him [the muscular Christian] hurl the ball, or pitch the quoit, or tug at the oar, or poise the rifle. I would I might see our gymnasium thronged every day at suitable hours with earnest devotees to physical culture. Only let all these things be done with the distinct recognition that we have a higher nature, and in such manner and measure as to do no harm to what is best and noblest in this loftier realm.³⁸

For Dr. Foss, the muscular Christian's body accompanied his soul in an everlasting way and without hierarchical positioning between the two. He also acknowledged his soul of a "higher nature" and in the "loftier realm" as the blatant outside force that moved his body. Yet, in his speech, when referring to the "loftier realm," did Dr. Foss imply something/someone else beyond the muscular Christian himself as the outside force? An implication of God, as a celestial being that was not necessarily separate from the muscular Christian yet was still outside of his conscious reach, may only be inferred here as part of the outside force. Following this inference, Dr. Foss may have intended such ambiguity in order to illuminate the inability to express in words his nearness to God's grand reality. This inability was theorized by American psychologist William James as "ineffability" in religious experience. "No one can make clear to another who has never had a certain feeling, in what the quality or worth of it [the religious experience] consists."³⁹

³⁸ "School and College," 12. See footnote 31.

³⁹ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 380.

Amidst the second major point of internal contention, in which some muscular Christians explicitly allocated God as the outside force and others did not, external influences like the eugenics theory of the white noble savage could no longer reconcile muscular Christianity's state of internal contention since the theory stayed within the confines of the white man *himself*. Yet, in their shifting emphasis from theory to policy implementation, early American eugenics and progressivism began "improving" the seemingly dire social conditions as muscular Christianity's quest for perfection became about the approach to utopia.

In relation to the eugenics movement, implementing eugenics regulations fell into two broad categories. Positive eugenics, the encouragement for certain persons and groups to reproduce, mainly involved eugenic marriage counseling centers as well as "Better Baby" and "Fitter Family" contests that incentivized certain couples to reproduce.

⁴⁰ As a direct and violent contrast, negative eugenics was not about mere discouragement in its practice. Policy-makers implemented brutal mandates to forcibly stop groups they deemed undesirable from reproducing. By 1915, thirteen states passed sterilization laws that were purposely written ambiguously in order to allow state professionals to forcibly stop those they deemed as sexual predators or "mentally inadequate" from producing offspring.⁴¹ In reality, many marginalized groups were susceptible to this highly invasive and violent form of negative eugenics.

⁴⁰ Phillipa Levine, *Eugenics: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University, 2017), 49, 51.

⁴¹ Pickens, *Eugenics and the Progressives*, 90.

Progressivism, a “fourth branch” of U.S. government that discouraged laissez-faire and promoted a “visible hand” in economic regulation,⁴² was often intimately connected with the eugenics movement. Both movements emphasized the expertise of professionals and constant policy-implementation to seemingly improve the lives of U.S. residents. As progressivism shifted emphasis from theory to practice near the same time as the eugenics movement, both movements became inextricably connected in which it is impossible to specifically label a policy as either originating from eugenics or progressivism. For instance, many eugenicists, like birth control activist Margaret Sanger, advocated for sterilization of the “ever-increasing class of morons” because it would seemingly lower the taxes of the already over-taxed public.⁴³ Critically examining Sanger’s advocacy for sterilization and the overall development of the two movements should not solely be about determining if eugenic theory influenced progressive theory or vice versa. Rather it is about recognizing that both the pseudoscientific and political-economic framework were, as author of *Eugenics and the Progressives* Donald E. Pickens describes, “twin expressions of the same naturalistic condition”⁴⁴ in which American society purportedly required state experts to intervene on its behalf.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, in which eugenics and progressivism seemingly improved societal conditions when muscular Christians concentrated on their

⁴² Leonard, *Illiberal Reformers*, x.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 93-94.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 93.

approach to utopia, the growing professionalization of sports deepened muscular Christianity's state of internal contention. Muscular Christians could not determine the connection (or lack thereof) between Christianity and sports. The movement entered its second phase, "Protestant ambivalence regarding combining sport and Christianity,"⁴⁵ which included contention regarding participation in professional athletics as a legitimate way to approach utopia.

According to James O. Murray, Princeton University's first dean who advocated for a muscular Christianity rooted in moral courage, "religious entertainments" like physical exercise served as a mere "drawing element in the pulpit." Its importance to approach utopia greatly paled in comparison to the importance of intentional prayer. It did not matter whether physical exercise was professionalized or not because it was only through prayer that one would receive "... one breath of God's spirit ... one touch of that Spirit on the long-sealed spiritual vision, and the whole soul is alert and absorbed by the great spiritual interests, by truth, by the means of grace."⁴⁶ For muscular Christians like Murray, prayer served as the primary channel to the ideal with the Holy Spirit as the specified outside force. This view on the approach to utopia was similar to how the unknown author of "The Beauty of the Lord our God" blatantly prioritized the ideal over the material and specifically allocated God as the outside force. Material aspects like physical exercise subsided in relevancy.

⁴⁵ Balzer, "Religion and Sports in America," 290.

⁴⁶ James O. Murray, "Christ as A Man of Prayer," in *Princeton Sermons* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1893), 209.

Baseball athlete turned preacher Billy Sunday agreed with Murray's view that physical exertion itself was a drawing element, but he did not have any issue with casually participating in physical exercise. During his sermons, Sunday commonly used sports analogies and even broke furniture to retain people's attention.⁴⁷ His issue was primarily with the professionalization of sports since he perceived the systematic formation of physical culture as a harmful manifestation of modernism. Organization and elitism of professionalized athletics emphasized key modernist attributes that directly opposed his fundamentalist value of accessibility for the working class. Reflecting on his deep disdain for modernist evangelicals and admiring his own ability to appeal to the masses, Sunday asserts, "What do I care if some puff-eyed little dibly preacher goes tibly-tibbling around because I use plain Anglo-Saxon words? I want people to know what I mean and that's why I try to get down where they live."⁴⁸ Following Sunday's fundamentalist line of exposition, how could participation in professionalized athletics be considered its own form of religious experience and approach to utopia if it perpetuated the very features of muscular Christianity's seeming social crises, such as overcivilization through urbanization and Victorian lifestyles?

Basketball inventor James Naismith did not interpret professionalized sports as a perpetuation of muscular Christianity's seeming social crises, but as an indispensable way for many men to properly harness their natural state of noble savagery. Although the theory of the white noble savage could no longer reconcile contentions within the

⁴⁷ Ibid, 291. Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 59.

⁴⁸ William G. McLoughlin, *Billy Sunday Was His Real Name* (Chicago: 1955), 164.

movement, muscular Christians like Naismith still viewed the white noble savage's primal state as central to the approach to utopia. When reflecting on the young men that recently entered the city during the industrial age, Naismith advocates, "What this new generation wanted was pleasure and thrill rather than physical benefits."⁴⁹ For many muscular Christians like Naismith, the professionalization of sports could reach young men in ways that no other form of Christian outreach, such as prayer, could accomplish.⁵⁰ by appealing to their primal impulses like those related to thrill and pleasure. In the similar way in which YMCA gymnasiums offered both Christian and recreational alternatives in the city, professionally organized exercise adequately satisfied the white noble savage's primal state without compromising his Christianity or becoming "too" savage-like.

Near muscular Christianity's end, muscular Christians *internally* struggled with their own stances on immigration and certain marginalized groups "turned to sport as one method of demonstrating their ability to fit in American culture" as religious studies scholar Annie Blazer succinctly explains it.⁵¹ These changes signified muscular Christianity's steady change in the seeming severity of the social crisis. The muscular Christian's personal contention regarding immigration illuminated itself through his constant oscillating between two types of nationalism. The first was racial nationalism - people bonded by common ancestry, skin color, and inherent ability to self-govern. The

⁴⁹ James Naismith, *Basketball: Its Origins and Development* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press), 30.

⁵⁰ Blazer, "Religion and Sports in America," 290-291.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 292.

other was civic nationalism - fundamental equality for all humans.⁵² In “Association Men and Immigration,” leading YMCA member Howard B. Grose oscillated between racial and civic nationalism when trying to determine his stance on immigration. Grose first describes steady immigration to the U.S. as the “greatest American problem” and proposes general solutions in order to preserve the “cherished ideals and institutions” in the US.⁵³ Grose explains:

First of all there must be vision and purpose ... The immigrants must be Americanized ... Where there are colonies of immigrants as in the large cities, it may be necessary to establish special Associations for them .. If there is one thing more than another that this old-young world needs, it is real brotherhood. For that the Young Men’s Christian Association [YMCA] ought to stand in the spirit of a true democracy that recognizes no race, color, or condition, but is ready to meet all on the plane of service.

⁵⁴

Grose’s “vision” of Americanized yet segregated immigrants reveals the constant fluctuation between civic and racial nationalism. At the same time that the YMCA would stand by the “spirit of true democracy” in which the organization did not recognize any condition that would jeopardize the equality of human beings, the YMCA would segregate “colonies of immigrants” by having them create their own “special” chapters. As the U.S. no longer seemed to be in the same dire level of turmoil that muscular Christians initially deemed it to be, “condition-blind” policies like Grose’s self-imposed one were attempts to promote diversity and equality with an underlying foundation of xenophobia and racism.

⁵² Gerstle, *American Crucible* 4.

⁵³ Grose, “Association Men and Immigration,” 6.

⁵⁴ *Ibid* 6-7.

In the early twentieth century, Jewish immigrants, Mormon communities, and Catholic immigrants began participating in muscular Christianity by playing sports in order to assimilate within American society. As religious scholar Annie Blazer notes, certain Jewish men from Eastern Europe pursued careers in American professional sports in order to extinguish the stereotype that Jewish men were overtly bookish and fragile. Their pursuits generated a unique form of Jewish manliness related to baseball, basketball, and boxing all while fostering a sense of belonging in the U.S..⁵⁵ Similarly to Jewish male immigrants, Mormon men began participating in American sports in order to distance The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) from the custom of polygamy. The LDS officially renounced the custom in 1890 but the Church continuously endured prejudice soon after the renunciation.⁵⁶ Through their active involvement with athletics, Mormon men further distanced themselves and the LDS from polygamy. The Catholic school systems in the U.S. provided Catholic women with more possibilities to venture into sports than most American women, allowing Catholic women to gain a rare exposure and kinship to American culture.⁵⁷

Religious studies scholar, Annie Blazer, places marginalized groups' participation in muscular Christianity as part of muscular Christianity's final phase of "the eventual secularization of muscular Christian ideals as American rather than Protestant ideals."⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Blazer, "Religion and Sports in America," 292-293.

⁵⁶ Richard Kimball, "Muscular Mormonism," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 25, no. 5 (2008), 550.

⁵⁷ Blazer, "Religion and Sports in America," 293.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 290.

Yet, articulating the movement's near end as a process of secularization is debatable. If we only consider the approach to utopia through God, the Supreme Being, as the outside force, then Blazer's description is very accurate since discourse involving muscular Christianity became much more culturally based rather than Protestant based. Yet, as mentioned in the introduction, we are especially concerned with the religious experience of muscular Christians who attributed their approach to utopia to an ambiguous outside force and view the ideal and material parts of God's reality as equal parts. With such special focus, secularization did not necessarily occur near the end of muscular Christianity.

Thus, the PPIE not only exemplified muscular Christianity's quest for perfection, but exemplified the muscular Christian's peculiar religious experience of healthy-mindedness in which God, a celestial being that is not necessarily separable from the muscular Christian yet outside of his conscious reach, was the outside force. A majority of the PPIE was adorned with classical imagery in order to signify the invaluable importance of both the ideal and the muscular Christian's built physicality. For instance, the official poster of the PPIE (figure 1), the *Thirteenth Labor of Hercules*, not only illustrates Hercules as the ideal representation of masculinity through his symmetrical muscles, but as art historian Mireille M. Lee observes, the obscurity of the herculean man's face represents any white man.⁵⁹ Even though muscular Christians did

⁵⁹ Mireille M. Lee, "Classical Nudity and Eugenics at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition (PPIE)," *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, (June 2019): 2-3, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12138-019-00531-5>

not possess perfectly symmetrical muscles like Hercules, members like Theodore Roosevelt were often likened to the demi-God in order to reveal the equal and invaluable importance of both the ideal and material in God's reality.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ In his biography on Theodore Roosevelt, American author and reverend Ferdinand Iglehart likens Hercules and the mythology of his twelve labors to Roosevelt and his political accomplishments. For more information see: Ferdinand Iglehart, *The Man As I Knew Him* (New York: The Christian Herald, 1919).



Figure 1 Perham Wilhelm Nahl,
The Thirteenth Labor of Hercules.

A section of the PPIE known as the “Joy Zone” did not exude the same classical aesthetic. Rather, the smaller section displayed extremely xenophobic and racist caricatures of non-Aryan immigrants and other marginalized groups. The “Joy Zone” included an “Underground China” with fake opium dens and “Dixie Land,” a theater whose sign displayed black slaves with exaggerated facial features above a slice of watermelon.⁶¹ Such unashamedly and overt displays of prejudice exemplified the dwindling relevance of socio-political conditions during the muscular Christian’s

⁶¹ Lee, “Classical Nudity and Eugenics at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition (PPIE),” 8-9.

approach to utopia. His religious experience of healthy-mindedness never served as a mental escape from what he considered social concerns. Rather, the muscular Christian acknowledged a dwindling relevancy to the seeming state of U.S. society as he explicitly acknowledged it through a severely distorted lens. In the words of American psychologist William James, “and so far as you yourself are concerned at any rate, though the facts may still exist, their evil character exists no longer.”⁶²

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If William James could somehow review this article, I imagine that he would quickly interject the moment I positioned the muscular Christian’s approach to utopia as a synthesis of his inability to uphold pre-urban modes of social relations amidst rapid industrialization. As a radical empiricist and indeterminist, James did not believe that we could absolutely know when we could attain truth. In other words, as he explains in his work, *The Will to Believe*, “To know is one thing, and to know for certain that we know is another.”⁶³ Following this course of thought, my assertion of the muscular Christian’s religious experience can only remain as a hypothesis “liable to modifications.”⁶⁴ Yet, I truly believe that the muscular Christian’s approach to utopia can demonstrate a meeting point between Jamesian, Hegelian, and Marxist theory.

In his lecture, “On Some Hegelisms,” James openly refutes Hegel’s philosophy with one of his most compelling critiques. The deterministic nature of the material realm,

⁶² James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 89.

⁶³ William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1912), 12.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, viii.

in which we must choose between two contradictions (Hegel's dialectic) such as selfishness or altruism can never reach a harmony with the ideal because the ideal is indeterministic, in which two opposing things can exist at the same time. James' centering of the material is an excellent entry point for Marxist theory. Although James never openly critiques Marxist philosophy, if we follow Jamesian thinking, the indeterminist nature of the ideal could never harmonize with the ultimate Marxist priority of the material.

With a clear opposition established between Jamesian theory and Hegelian/Marxist theory, the muscular Christian's approach to utopia can be explored through these avenues. Is there room for flexibility, movement within a spectrum, between determinism and indeterminism in which the muscular Christian approaching utopia prioritized his free will yet still perpetuated the ever-growing brutal conditions of industrial capitalism through alienation? In James' brief mention of soft determinism, in which sometimes "we" are free and sometimes we are not,⁶⁵ was this the case for the muscular Christian and his religious experience of healthy-mindedness? These are thoughts and questions that require further exploration.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 150.

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