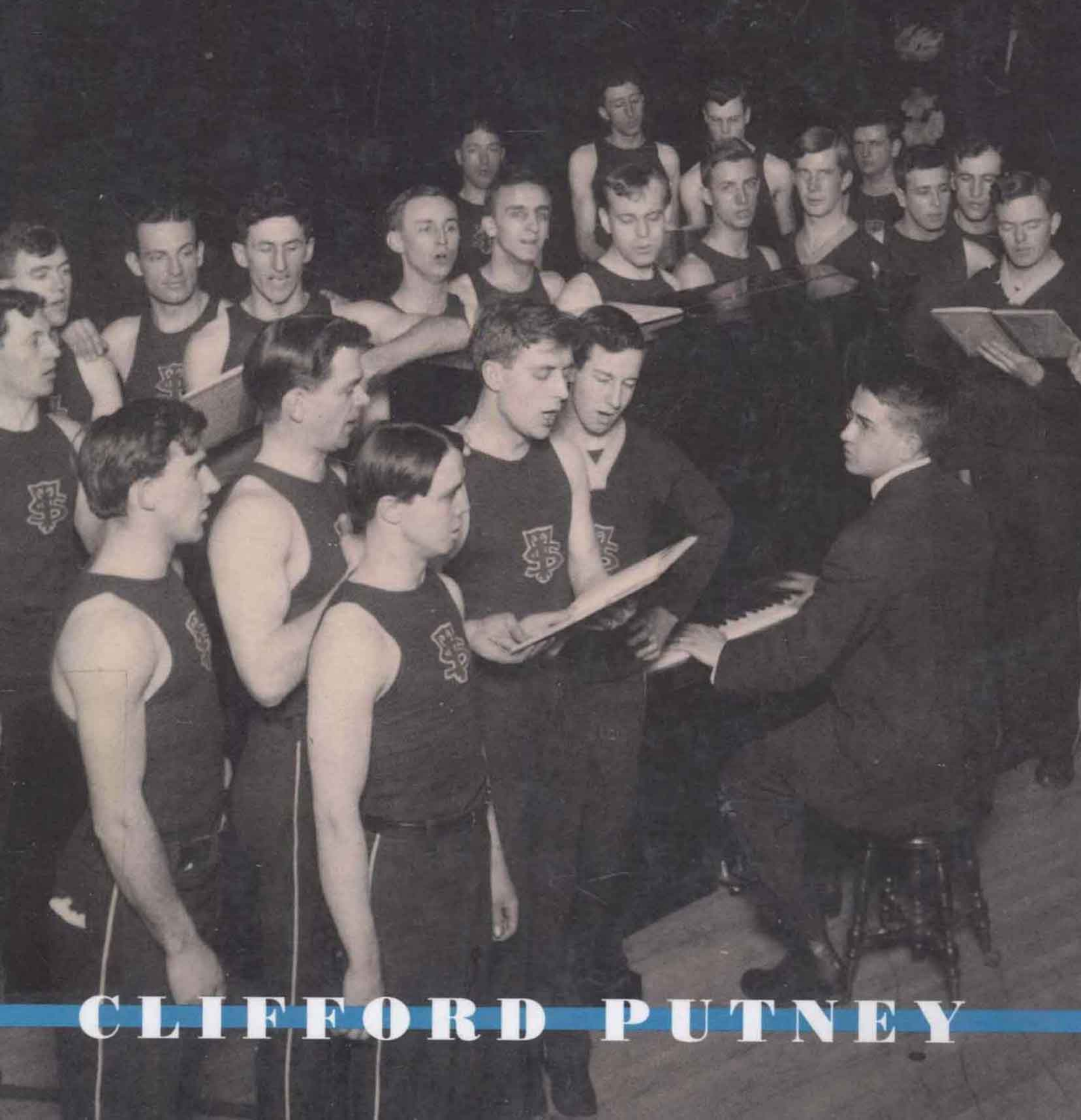


MUSCULAR *Christianity*

MANHOOD AND SPORTS IN
PROTESTANT AMERICA, 1880–1920



CLIFFORD PUTNEY

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*To my parents,
Richard Spencer Putney
and
Audrey Wallace Putney*

Illustrations

Illustrations follow page 126.

Theodore Roosevelt on a visit to Yellowstone in 1903

G. Stanley Hall

Rustic chapel of St. Michaels Mission, Wyoming

The “stubby Christians” football team, circa 1891

African-American men exercising in a Chicago YMCA, circa 1916

Hymn singing in the gymnasium of the International YMCA Training School, 1909

His New Day by S. M. Palmer, 1920

Boys in the Central YMCA of Rochester, New York, seated in the form of the YMCA triangle

Participants in the Far Eastern Championship Games, 1913

Men and Religion Forward movement Conference on Religious Work, April 1912

Hymn singing in the parlor of the Warrenton Street YWCA, Boston

YMCA volleyball for women, circa 1925

Camp Fire Girls co-founder Charlotte Gulick making a ceremonial fire, circa 1914

Cover of a YMCA-related song book, circa 1918

Meeting of “the largest Bible class in the world,” Waco, Texas, 1918

The Christian Student by Daniel Chester French, 1913

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Introduction

Among all the marvelous advances of Christianity either within this organization [the YMCA] or without it, in this land and century or any other lands and ages, the future historian of the church of Christ will place this movement of carrying the gospel to the body as one of the most epoch making.

—G. STANLEY HALL (1902)

Between 1880 and 1920, American Protestants in many denominations witnessed the flourishing in their pulpits and seminaries of a strain of religiosity known, both admiringly and pejoratively, as “muscular Christianity.” Converts to this creed included Josiah Strong, a Social Gospel minister who thought bodily strength a prerequisite for doing good; G. Stanley Hall, a pioneer psychologist who wished to reinvigorate “old-stock” Americans; and President Theodore Roosevelt, an advocate of strenuous religion for “the Strenuous Life.” These and other stalwart supporters of Christian manliness hoped to energize the churches and to counteract the supposedly enervating effects of urban living. To realize their aims, they promulgated competitive sports, physical education, and other staples of modern-day life.

Muscular Christians were active not only in America but also in England, where the term “muscular Christianity” arose in the 1850s to describe the novels of Thomas Hughes and Charles Kingsley. Both of these men believed that the Anglican Church of their day was becoming overly tolerant of physical weakness and effeminacy. To reverse this perceived trend, Hughes and Kingsley worked to infuse Anglicanism with enough health and manliness to make it a suitable agent for British imperialism. Their ideas were also exported to America, where they were received with enthusiasm by Unitarian minister Thomas Wentworth Higginson. In a seminal 1858 *Atlantic Monthly*

article entitled “Saints, and Their Bodies,” Higginson praised Hughes and Kingsley for being supportive of health and manliness. He also wished that health and manliness were more evident in America’s Protestant churches, which he viewed as unhealthy and unmanly.¹

Higginson’s view was not without some basis in fact. American Protestant churches in the colonial and antebellum periods may indeed have fostered ill health, since they tended to view artificial exercise as an immoral waste of time. In addition, since the late seventeenth century Protestant churches in America have had more female than male adherents.² This gender imbalance troubled antebellum Southern male evangelicals, whose churches were frequently viewed as unmanly.³ It also troubled Northern male evangelical sponsors of the so-called “Businessmen’s Awakening,” a revival that flourished in several cities from 1857 to 1858.⁴ Designed to bring men into church, the Businessmen’s Awakening in some ways resembled the first American Young Men’s Christian Associations, which were formed in the 1850s partly in order to fill the churches with young men.

The Businessmen’s Awakening and the YMCAs were connected not only by their focus on men but also by their association with evangelist Dwight L. Moody, who as a young entrepreneur in Chicago participated in both the Businessmen’s Awakening and the Chicago YMCA. Later in life, Moody became a full-time evangelist, traveling around the country and preaching (as one historian contends) primarily to men.⁵ Moody also held a series of conferences for religious workers in the vicinity of Northfield, Massachusetts. These conferences, the first of which was held in 1885, helped to advance muscular Christianity in America by bringing together Christian athletes such as football hero Amos Alonzo Stagg, who, like Moody, believed that religion and sports were compatible.⁶

The fact that Moody promoted religion and sport at his Northfield conferences has led two historians to call him “the champion of an indigenous American brand of muscular Christianity.”⁷ If muscular Christianity is defined as a Christian commitment to health and manliness, there is no doubt that Moody was intimately affiliated with muscular Christian institutions such as the YMCA and the Northfield conferences. But whether Moody himself was a muscular Christian is a debatable question. Unlike some of the religious workers whom he hosted at Northfield, Moody was fond of sentimental Victorian hymns that emphasized motherhood and the nurturing side of

Christ.⁸ He also had enough room in his ministry for women, many of whom flocked to the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago and Moody's school for girls in Northfield, Massachusetts.⁹

Moody's tolerance for women in religion differentiated him from strident muscular Christians such as G. Stanley Hall, who talked loudly around 1900 about the existence of a "woman peril" in the churches. Believers in this peril were concerned not only about the disproportionate number of women in church but also about the "feminizing" influence that churchwomen supposedly had on various aspects of Victorian religion, including denominational hymn books, which muscular Christians found overly sentimental; popular images of Jesus, which they viewed as overly feminine; and the ministry, which they believed was full of effeminate men. The muscular Christians' aversion to sentimentality, refinement, and other stereotypically feminine traits was not shared by everyone. But their contention that stereotypically feminine traits characterized much of Victorian religion is hard to refute.

The prevalence of stereotypically feminine traits within American Protestant churches during the Victorian period has been well documented by Ann Douglas, who views the ecclesiastical enshrinement of feminine tastes as a reflection of women's power within the churches.¹⁰ This power will be discussed in Chapters 1 and 3, in which I contend that muscular Christianity was in part a male reaction against women's religious leadership. The strength of that leadership undoubtedly irritated a number of men, and it probably helped to retard the spread of muscular Christianity, which did not really take off in America until the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Before that time, according to Benjamin Rader, talk of "Christian manliness" came mainly from "old-stock" eastern patricians such as Thomas Wentworth Higginson. But in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, "the popularity of Christian manliness began to extend beyond the eastern elite to middle-status Protestants, even to those of an evangelical temperament."¹¹

The spread of muscular Christianity in the closing decades of the nineteenth century resulted from numerous factors, including athletic developments, such as a decline in the evangelical Christian antipathy toward sports, the adoption by most YMCAs of athletic programs, and the invention by YMCA men of "character-building" sports such as basketball and volleyball. Also helping to advance muscular Chris-

tianity in the late nineteenth century was an imperialistic urge to extend American Christianity overseas in a forceful way. This could hardly be done by “womanly” missionaries, argued muscular Christians, who called upon “manly men” to spread the Gospel not only in “heathen” lands but also in American churches, especially those that were supposedly suffering from an excess of Victorian sentimentality.

The muscular Christian call for manly men was a loud one. But the call for manly men in the Progressive Era did not emanate only from muscular Christians; it also emanated from secular figures in politics, academia, and the press, many of whom joined muscular Christians in bemoaning what Ann Douglas calls “the feminization of American culture”: the nineteenth-century relegation to women of such cultural responsibilities as the teaching of children, the instillment of religion and the determination of artistic merit.¹²

One sign of men’s dissatisfaction with feminized culture was the enormous popularity in nineteenth-century America of fraternal lodges such as the Masons, the Odd Fellows, and the Red Men. These purveyors of good fellowship did not hold with the Victorian cult of domesticity and its contention that true happiness was to be found only in the company of one’s wife and children. Instead, they served, in the opinion of Mark Carnes, as refuges from the home, providing an environment wherein “unsung” male virtues were praised and respected.¹³

Lodge members may have viewed Victorian domesticity as a threat. But a more material threat to manly men was the late-nineteenth-century emergence in America of large corporations, with their plethora of midlevel management positions. These sedentary office jobs did not provide the same opportunity for exercise as farm or factory work. Nor did the resultant weakening of men’s musculature escape the notice of contemporary writers, many of whom began to bemoan “the decline of the race” and the softness inherent in “overcivilization.”

Alarmed by the prospect of “overcivilized” middle- and upper-class managerial types being toppled by lower-class workers and muscular immigrants, many Progressive Era reformers hurried to endorse artificial exercise, outdoor camping, and other methods of strengthening America’s elite. They also inveighed against city living, woman teachers, and other things that were supposedly sapping the vitality of American males, particularly males of “Anglo-Saxon” lineage. If Anglo-Saxon men wanted to retain their dominant position in American

society, preached various reformers, then they would have to follow the example set by Theodore Roosevelt, who transformed himself via boxing and barbells from a sickly house-bound teenager into the rough-riding, safari-going, big-stick-wielding Bull Moose of legend.

Roosevelt's transformation and his efforts to make American culture more vigorous and manly have recently begun to interest historians such as Gail Bederman, Mark Carnes, Clyde Griffen, Kevin White, Michael Kimmel, and E. Anthony Rotundo. These pioneers in the emergent field of "men's history" agree that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries middle-class American Protestant white men were beset by a number of challenges, including such perceived threats to their status as non-Protestant immigration, the women's rights movement, and the ability of big business to wipe out the "little guy." As a result of these challenges, there arose what some are calling a "masculinity crisis" in the Progressive Era, a period when various male intellectuals, uncertain about their place in society, struggled to come up with a new model for manhood. The old model prescribed by the Victorians had stressed stoicism, gentility, and self-denial. But these traits in the opinion of many Progressives did not really enable native-born, middle-class white men to maintain their authority in an era when immigrant politicians, articulate suffragists, and powerful monopolists were on the ascendant.

Convinced that the archetypal buttoned-down Victorian gentleman was ill-equipped to handle the challenges posed by modernity, many Progressives proposed a new model for manhood, one that stressed action rather than reflection and aggression rather than gentility. To describe their new ideal man, his supporters even adopted a new word, the adjective "masculine," which as Gail Bederman points out did not come into general usage until the 1890s.¹⁴ Before that decade, admirable men were often described as "manly." But since the word "manly" sometimes meant "civilized" in the Victorian period, it lost some of its cachet in the Progressive Era, when "overcivilization" was attacked by men such as G. Stanley Hall, who believed in the primacy of "primitive" instincts and emotions. Hall and other proponents of what E. Anthony Rotundo calls "passionate manhood" never abandoned the term "manly."¹⁵ But they did supplement it with the word "masculine," which in their minds connoted the sort of raw male power needed to combat disruptive changes in society.

To ensure that this power did not vanish from the "Anglo-Saxon

race,” many old-stock Progressives sought to instill manliness in their sons. Their task was abetted by nature-oriented institutions such as the newly formed Boy Scouts, which took “sissified” boys from the suburbs and sent them on rigorous trips into the forest. These forest outings were designed to endow white boys with “brute strength” and basic survival skills. But their encouragement of primitiveness within white boys raised a difficult question: If primitiveness was a valuable quality in white boys, then why was it often used as a term to denigrate nonwhite cultures?

This question placed many white Progressives in a quandary. On the one hand they wanted to encourage primitiveness in their sons. On the other hand they wanted to deplore primitiveness in other cultures. But their dilemma, while puzzling, was not insoluble. For as Gail Bederman points out, the developmental theories put forward by Progressive Era educators such as G. Stanley Hall explained that primitiveness was not a permanent condition—at least not for whites. Nonwhites in Hall’s opinion might languish forever in a state of permanent primitiveness. But primitiveness for white boys was supposedly just a phase through which they had to pass. If white boys gained the requisite amount of strength and hardihood in their primitive phase, Hall averred, then they could go on to master the intricacies of civilization without fear of nervous collapse.¹⁶

Hall’s developmental theory was exceedingly popular at the beginning of the twentieth century, largely because it enabled Progressives to combine primitivism with a sense of cultural superiority. But it was not only Hall’s developmental theory that enabled Progressives to combine conflicting attitudes toward civilization; it was also muscular Christianity. Like Hall’s theory, muscular Christianity laid stress on the importance of having a muscular, “preindustrial” body. This body, however, was not simply meant to do preindustrial chores such as hunting and farming; it had a higher purpose. Instead of just being a tool for labor, the body was viewed by muscular Christians as a tool for good, an agent to be used on behalf of social progress and world uplift.

The muscular Christian notion of using primitive bodies to advance civilized ideals enjoyed widespread popularity during the Progressive Era. But the centrality of muscular Christianity in Progressive Era thought has been largely overlooked by historians. Men’s historians in particular have said relatively little about muscular Christian par-

ticipation in the early-twentieth-century campaign to “defeminize” American culture.¹⁷ Their inattention to muscular Christianity (which Rotundo has called “the peak of absurdity”) may reflect the fact that nineteenth-century American Protestant churches have seldom been seen as bastions of aggressive masculinity.¹⁸ Instead of being portrayed as pro-masculine, the churches have generally been portrayed as pro-feminine by historians such as James Turner, who contends that many nineteenth-century intellectuals simply abandoned Protestantism after concluding that it had become too “unmanly.”¹⁹

While historians such as Turner are right to call the Protestant churches purveyors of domesticity, molders of idealized femininity, and the like, they are wrong to imply that the churches were devoid of manly men. They forget that not everyone connected with mainline Protestantism supported Victorian sentimentality, as evidenced by the abundance of Progressive Era ministers and laymen who advocated replacing “feminized” Christianity with a more masculine faith. These opponents of feminized religion were not only active in well-known organizations such as the Boy Scouts and the YMCA; they were also instrumental in forming “surprisingly underexploited” bodies such as the Protestant church brotherhoods, the Student Volunteer Movement, the Knights of King Arthur, and the Men and Religion Forward movement, all of which worked hard to make Christianity a religion to which “he-men” and boys might proudly belong.²⁰ Although a few books have been written about these lesser-known groups, most have been uncritical treatments, concerned more with their subject institutions than with muscular Christianity as a whole.

In an attempt to focus attention on muscular Christianity as a whole, this book provides an overview of the muscular Christian movement in America at its historical peak, roughly from 1880 to 1920. After 1920, pacifism, cynicism, church decline, and the devaluation of male friendships combined to undercut muscular Christianity—at least within the mainline Protestant churches. But in the forty years before 1920, an extraordinary amount of talk within Protestant churches focused on the need to rescue American manhood from sloth and effeminacy.

Muscular Christian talk of rescuing American manhood will undoubtedly prompt some to ask how inclusive the term “American manhood” really was. This is a good question, the answer to which is somewhat ambiguous. The evidence presented in this book suggests

that when white muscular Christians spoke of “American manhood,” they generally had in mind some sort of Anglo-Saxon ideal. But not all muscular Christians were white, as Nina Mjagkij points out in her work on black YMCA leaders. These individuals (who remained segregated from the main body of the “Y” until 1946) not only aimed to achieve “true manhood”; they also “advocated exercise as a means to prevent the decline of the physical male prowess of the members of their own race.”²¹

Middle-class black muscular Christians may have been as concerned as their white counterparts about the enervating effects of sedentary living. But Nina Mjagkij points out that while white muscular Christians viewed physical weakness as a threat to their continued enjoyment of power, black muscular Christians viewed it as an impediment to their achievement of civil rights. As a result, writes Mjagkij, black muscular Christians intent on achieving social justice often sounded less reactionary than white muscular Christians, whose fear of cultural obsolescence sometimes led them to lash out at immigrants and people of color.²²

Black muscular Christianity’s divergence from white muscular Christianity was not only qualitative; it was also quantitative, since Progressive Era black Protestant churches were decidedly less inclined than Progressive Era white Protestant churches to worry about the dangers of effeminacy in religion. That at any rate is the contention of church historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, who argues that while white churchmen debated with white churchwomen about whether Christ was more masculine than feminine, black churchmen and -women set the issue of Christ’s masculinity aside in order to concentrate exclusively on achieving “racial self-determination.”²³ Higginbotham’s case for the harmoniousness of gender relations in Progressive Era black churches is perhaps a bit overstated, but her assertion that the masculinist rhetoric of muscular Christianity flourished more in white churches than in black ones does square with the evidence I have found. That evidence points to the fact that muscular Christianity in the Progressive Era was primarily a white Christian phenomenon, though it undoubtedly influenced non-Christian groups such as the YMCA-inspired Young Men’s Hebrew Association, which practiced what novelist Max Nordau called “Muskeljudentum,” or Muscular Jewry.²⁴

If American muscular Christianity was primarily a white Christian

phenomenon, then some people will wonder whether the U.S. Catholic Church embraced muscular Christianity. The answer, according to Father Patrick Kelly, is that the Church did embrace muscular Christianity, but not until the latter part of the twentieth century, when it finally saw the religious value of sports. In the three centuries that preceded the twentieth century, writes Kelly, the Catholic Church “lost the ability to see God” in sports. As a result, it was “cut off from the development of modern sport.”²⁵

Kelly’s contention that sports and Catholicism did not really mix until the twentieth century is challenged by Christa Klein, who writes that sports were adopted in the latter half of the nineteenth century by at least two Catholic boys’ schools, St. John’s College (Fordham) and St. Francis Xavier. These schools, according to Klein, were led by Jesuits who noted the rise of muscular Christianity in the Protestant educational establishment. In response, the Jesuits at Fordham and Xavier developed a doctrine in the 1890s that Klein calls “Muscular Catholicism.” Like Protestant muscular Christianity, Muscular Catholicism stressed the importance of being a healthy athlete. But Muscular Catholicism in Klein’s view was not nearly as male-centric as Protestant muscular Christianity, which according to Klein “polarized masculine and feminine roles to an extent completely unknown in Catholic hagiography.”²⁶

Klein’s definition of Protestant muscular Christianity as an entirely male-centric phenomenon is refuted to some degree by Chapter 6 of this book, which argues that some aspects of Protestant muscular Christianity appealed to women in the Girl Scouts, the Camp Fire Girls, and the Young Women’s Christian Association. As for her assertion that Muscular Catholicism celebrated both “masculine and feminine character traits,” it will not be challenged here, since this book focuses largely, though not exclusively, on the spread of muscular Christianity among middle- to upper-class white Protestants.²⁷

Of the white Protestants who initially embraced muscular Christianity in the United States, most came from the North, particularly the urban Northeast, and most belonged to what E. Digby Baltzell called “the Protestant establishment”: a collection of such disproportionately influential mainline churches as the Congregationalists, Disciples, Episcopalians, American Baptists, Northern Presbyterians, and Northern Methodists.²⁸ Other, more theologically conservative churches were not implacably hostile to muscular Christianity (which