

# God in the Gym

BY ROGER WARD

A Christian perspective on sports must critique the competing “folk theologies” that develop around sports. Three books reviewed here examine the nineteenth-century vision of moral character, physical strength, and a bodily engaged Protestantism that became known as “muscular Christianity.”

---

**W**hen Tiger Woods eagled on the eighteenth hole of the 2008 U.S. Open Golf Tournament forcing a playoff round the next day, our sports-enthused nation took a deep breath and made plans to skip work that Monday. Television viewership was through the roof. Joking references to the ‘golf gods’ smiling on Tiger were mixed with appellations of the near divinity of Tiger himself. Compared to other professional golfers, not to mention the rest of us hackers, this one transcends the limits of the game, a model of what a golfer, an athlete, a person, can do.

Sports and games are deeply connected to religious practices and ideas, formal and folk theologies, and the shape of society. *Playing with God: Religion and Modern Sport* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007, 336pp., \$29.95), by William J. Baker, provides a wide ranging story of the interrelation of cult and sport from Mayan and Native American games, to the Greek Olympiad with its ritual purification and sacrifices before the games, to the Medieval monastic roots of tennis and handball.

Organized sports as we know them originated in England. On the British exportation of sports during the colonial era, he notes: “Britons not only taught the world to play; they also taught the world *how* to play with moral purpose” (p. 33). Yet, he worries that today sports “has lost the moral compass that for more than a century taught Americans to honor boundaries, play by the rules, and work together for a common good” (p. 257).

Baker is attentive to the intellectual history of sports myths and metaphors as well as the generation of organizations that emerged in response to leisure time, increasing urbanization, and the perceived feminization of Victorian religion. These organizations were sometimes associated with the idea of “muscular Christianity,” a late nineteenth century religious movement promoting the virtues of masculinity and bodily strength. Two writers in particular, Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes, influenced Victorian Christianity to reconsider the value of the human body and sports. In the novel *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* (1857), Hughes transformed his alma mater, Rugby School, into a vision of moral character, physical strength, and a bodily engaged Protestantism. Baker notes that muscular Christianity “originated simultaneously in Great Britain and the United States, largely because moral leaders in both countries responded similarly to similar urban problems of physical congestion, poor health, and changing attitudes toward religion, work, and play” (p. 35). This movement gained traction in the United States primarily through the influence of Thomas Higginson, whose review of *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* in the *Atlantic Monthly* popularized the term “muscular Christianity,” and Moses Coit Tyler who expanded the programs of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) from a social and religious gathering function to include physical recreation and organized sports. Baker follows the trajectory of muscular Christianity in its multiplicity of forms. He notes, for instance, The University of Notre Dame’s emergence as a focal point of Catholic identity through sports against the violent backdrop of the Ku Klux Klan, and the popularity of Christy Mathewson—a squeaky clean baseball player who stood out against mean-spirited players like Ty Cobb—who was “the first professional athlete to function as a role model for America’s youth” (p. 160).

Baker also discusses Jewish and Islamic perspectives on contemporary sports—for instance, the programs that lead to a large percentage of Jewish professional baseball players in the United States and the increasing prominence of Muslim faith in collegiate and professional sports. The scheduling dilemmas that Muslim athletes face in regard to faithfully practicing Islamic rituals make an interesting counterpoint to the total accommodation of Christian practices to the sports clock and calendar.



In *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003, 310 pp., \$22.00), Clifford Putney suggests the profound interest in masculine virtues and bodily strength represented in “muscular Christianity” corresponds to a Protestant worry that Christianity was over-feminized after the Puritan era. For years passive virtues like love, patience, and tenderness had been exalted, and women comprised a majority of church membership, active

attendance, and leadership. Sermons extolled strength and masculine virtues, but theologians and intellectuals fretted that if male participation did not increase, Christianity would “go to the wall.” Christian socialist F. D. Maurice, who accused Christians of “fleeing from the world instead of trying to mend it,” inspired Hughes and his *Tom Brown* books (p. 12). Among the staunchest advocates of Hughes’ vision “were Victorian educators, who liked its propagation of the muscular Christian values of fellowship, honor, and service” (p. 15). For Moses Coit Tyler, author of *The Brawnville Papers* (1869), “muscular Christianity” meant simply “Christianity applied to the treatment and the use of our bodies.” But for the *North Carolina Presbyterian*, the phrase was “suggestive of force and that high-strung, nervous energy which by constant exercise has developed its possessor into the stature of a perfect man in Christ Jesus” (p. 22). Beginning in the 1860s organized sports and gymnasiums were used both to develop male bodies and attract their attendance to church. This partnering of sports and religion shaped cities like New York and St. Louis, where the finest sports facilities were church-run (p. 62).

Putney’s primary story is related to the YMCA’s influence on muscular Christianity. Significant figures include Robert McBurney, who directed the New York YMCA and made it into a model for other “Y’s,” and Luther Gulick, “the greatest of YMCA philosophers” who originated the phrase “body, mind, spirit” after Deuteronomy 6:5 (pp. 69-70). “Before Gulick, the ‘Y’ had kept gymnastics subordinate to evangelism,” Putney notes. “After him, it held physical fitness, no less than religious conviction, responsible for leading men to Glory” (p. 72). The intentional formation of young men in aggressiveness and the rejection of sentimentality is evident even in the YMCA hymnbooks; one titled *Manly Songs for Christian Men* features hymns that encourage “heroic, active masculine qualities rather than...the passive virtues and states of mind and feeling” (p. 96).

What is most satisfying about this book is Putney’s attention to the interplay among politics, literature, and cultural iconography in Protestant efforts to direct and develop sport. He draws out voices that are critical of evangelical Protestants who seemingly are unaware of their own sexual insecurities on a grand scale. Examples abound of theological language engaging metaphors of masculine power that are grotesque by current standards, and during this time of male insecurity, women are intentionally excluded from sports. The most significant event undermining muscular Christianity, however, was the disillusionment with Christianity caused by the horrors of World War I and its aftermath. In post-war America there was open “disdain for the ideals of Christian chivalry,” not only among writers like Ernest Hemingway and George Santayana, but also the general public. Muscular Christianity appeared to be “mindless strenuousness tied not to social reform but to what cereal king J. H. Kellogg called the new religion ‘of being good to yourself’” (p. 200). The post-war crowd was not receptive to

saving the world, advancing civic values, or personal salvation. It was excited by “such newly accessible leisure-time pursuits as automobiling and listening to the radio” (p. 201).

Putney’s discussion of gender insecurities behind the development of muscular Christianity is a welcome and powerful check on the Protestant tendency toward triumphalism. Nevertheless, he downplays the signifi-

---

**The First World War undermined muscular Christianity, which appeared to be “mindless strenuousness tied not to social reform but to what cereal king J. H. Kellogg called the new religion ‘of being good to yourself.’”**

---

cance of revivalism and the positive influence of Christian devotion among masses of young men during this crucial stage in the development of our national identity. The revival movement was real and formative, and sports programs aimed at men played a vital but not exclusive role in that formation. Putney’s thesis that gender concerns were the driving force behind the

muscular Christian movement verges on a fallacy of emphasis. It obscures the significance of denominational organizations that superseded sports programs, like the Southern Baptist Convention’s Cooperative Program for mission and education. I am less convinced than Putney that any insecurity can have the institution-forming power exhibited by muscular Christianity.



*Muscular Christianity: Evangelical Protestants and the Development of American Sport* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999, 288 pp., OOP), by Tony Ladd and James A. Mathisen, recounts the people and organizations connected to muscular Christianity in a more honorific tone. The sense of this book is the success of the evangelical message through the adoption, development, and dynamic interaction with sports. Focusing on the American reception of Hughes’s *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*, the authors track the subsequent engagement, disengagement, and re-engagement of evangelicals with sports. For the early years they focus on evangelist D. L. Moody’s support of the YMCA’s sports initiatives. “Moody was the champion of an indigenous, American brand of muscular Christianity in the final decades of the century,” they note. “While scholars have firmly established Moody’s role in American revivalism, his association with muscular Christianity has been largely ignored” (pp. 32-33). As America changed rapidly due to immigration between 1865 and 1900 that increased the population from thirty-one to seventy-six million people, “Muscular Christians living in an industrialized,

urban culture capitalized on this development and served as catalysts to help make modern sports possible" (p. 17).

Ladd and Mathisen follow high profile personalities like C. T. Studd, the famous Cambridge cricketer and missionary to whom we are obliged for the admonition "to play for the glory of God" (p. 45), and his brother, J. E. K. Studd, who toured America and influenced thousands of college students toward "Keswick holiness, personal Bible study, and missionary outreach" (p. 51). The golden age of the movement, however, began in 1887 at Mt. Hermon, Massachusetts, where Moody "formalized" the union of sport and religion (p. 52). A prime example of this union was James Naismith's creation of basketball at the behest of Luther Gulick. The game was an effort at "social engineering" by placing individuals in a situation where they can engage in self-instruction (p. 71). This attitude corresponds to the Social Gospel hope of improving the conditions of society, or "making the good better," as opposed to the more pre-millennial conception of "making the bad better."

The authors note a later shift in theological basis for Christian involvement in organized sports from a post-millennial Social Gospelist effort to perfect humans and society, to a pre-millennial evangelical model of human corruption that will be cancelled only by the return of Jesus. This shift resulted, they argue, from the tragedy of World War I as well as the burgeoning power of professional sports. "Not only were [Christian sports advocates] stymied by a culture they thought they were leading, but they were also carrying the baggage of unfulfilled idealism of what sport could do in and of itself. The burden became too great, and many muscular Christians may have abandoned social agendas for strictly spiritual ones" (p. 84). In this era, evangelical Christians turned to sports figures like track star Gil Dodds as exemplars of fidelity, and to sport itself as a "cultural legitimizer" for marginalized fundamentalists (p. 119). I suspect, however, this interpretation is too simple, for it overlooks distinctions between the Social Gospel and other cultural reform efforts, as well as the tension created by the Southern rejection of Northern models of sports.

Ladd and Mathisen conclude on the note of re-engagement of evangelicals with sports, citing programs such as Overseas Crusade, Athletes in Action, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, and chaplaincy programs in major league sports including NASCAR racing. Once again, Protestant evangelicals seem to be somewhat at home in the world of sports. The authors suspect, however, this relationship is grounded only in superficial similarities between sports participation and the gospel rather than "a systematically theological approach among evangelicals to their mission and self-understanding." Appeal to these similarities – sports' usefulness in spreading the gospel, the inculcation of self-control and other virtues, and the role of heroic models – have come to "constitute a kind of 'folk theology of muscular Christianity'" (p. 219).

The reference to “folk theology” – the widely-held, unreflective beliefs about God and salvation in a culture – is significant for understanding sports and religion, particularly in the United States. “There are no purely profane festivals,” theologian Josef Pieper has reminded us. “A festival without gods is a non-concept.”<sup>†</sup> The collective response to significant sports moments like Tiger Wood’s comeback at the 2008 U. S. Open Golf Tournament, or to major championships like the Super Bowl, the World Cup, and the World Series demonstrates our longing for an experience that transcends daily concerns and common abilities. Indeed, organized sports – the players and organizations, the media’s analysis and promotion, the marquee events and audiences – often overwhelm the influence of (other) organized religion on the direction of our society. This simple fact is one reason these books and others like them are of interest. For whatever gods we are serving in sports that have such a pronounced hold on our attention, they are not the God we worship in church. How do our theologically grounded longings lead to their antithesis – idolatry? A Christian perspective on sports must include a critique of the competing “folk theologies” that develop around sports.

But there is another reason to study these books. The beauty and joy of bodily movement, defined either by limits of nature, limits of competition, or participation in sacred or secular ritual practices, are the basis of much of our human identity. Through organized physical activity and play, we relate our bodily existence to God. Many modern sports originated in Christian visions of the good life, and these influential social and cultural practices remain a field ready for harvest.

#### **NOTE**

† Josef Pieper, *In Tune with the World: A Theory of Festivity* (Notre Dame, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, [1963], reprinted 1999), 34.

---



#### **ROGER WARD**

*is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Georgetown College in Georgetown, Kentucky.*