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# Jesus Didn't Tap: Masculinity, Theology, and Ideology in Christian Mixed Martial Arts

Justine Greve

God, you are the ultimate, you are the ultimate fighter.

—Joe Boyd<sup>1</sup>

A shot of the Bible against Ben Henderson's bare chest cuts to a hazy video of the fighter boxing. In a voice-over, Henderson reads the Twenty-third Psalm. "The Lord is my shepherd," he says, and he punches the air. "He leads me in paths of righteousness"—Henderson steps into the bright lights of the arena to roaring cheers from the crowd—"for his name's sake." The video, a clip from a feature on Spike TV, goes on to discuss the fighter's successful career in mixed martial arts and his Christian faith.<sup>2</sup> For Henderson, the two are intertwined. He is a fighter, and he is a Christian, and these identities reinforce each other.

To some onlookers, the juxtaposition of Christianity with mixed martial arts (also called MMA or ultimate fighting) seems almost blasphemous. "These men are 'Christians?'" an incredulous viewer commented on the YouTube video "Christian MMA fighters." "There is nothing Christ like [*sic*] about making others bleed for 'sport.'"<sup>3</sup> And the athletes *do* bleed. MMA—a combination of wrestling, boxing, Muay Thai kickboxing, and Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu—was once labeled "human cockfighting" by Senator John McCain.<sup>4</sup> Yet Christian mixed martial artists and MMA fans—from Catholic to evangelical—do not see their faith and their sport as incompatible. Rather, they say, ultimate fighting teaches Christian values. It can be a means of spreading the gospel and remasculinizing a faith some perceive as feminine.

This is not the first time sports have been deployed to serve Christianity. In several of his epistles, particularly 1 Corinthians, the apostle Paul capitalizes on his readers' interest in Olympic sports, comparing the Christian life to a race or a fight. U.S. evangelicals have

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made good use of this language, employing sports (like Paul) to attract new members. But conversion has never been the only item on the agenda. For the Progressive-era Protestants known as muscular Christians, a physically fit body was a sign of self-discipline, self-control, self-respect—in short, of Christian virtue. Directed primarily at males, the movement was a response to a late-nineteenth-century “crisis of masculinity.” In light of fears about the feminization of culture, churches gave their faith and the image of Christ a masculine makeover. Pastors, YMCA superintendents, and other reformers tied muscle to manliness to godliness. Putting aside years of contention over their relationship with athletics, churches got on board with sport.

When scholars of sport and religion trace the muscular Christian legacy to the present, they tend to look at groups like the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA), a missionary organization for religious coaches and players. These writers see muscular Christianity in fingers pointed to the sky after touchdowns and athletes speaking publicly about their faith. They view such practices as evangelical marketing techniques, focusing on believers’ use of sports (and athletic celebrity) to spread the faith. They suggest that the emphasis of muscular Christianity has shifted from salvation through bodily improvement (as preached at the turn of the century) to winning converts. Indeed, scholars such as William Baker in *Playing with God* and Tony Ladd and James Mathisen in *Muscular Christianity* have argued that the modern movement is theology-less or preaches “folk theology”: essentially a locker room pep talk with a touch of Jesus thrown in.<sup>5</sup> In *Good Game*, Shirl Hoffman refers to “the theological haze that is Sportianity.”<sup>6</sup> He sees the religious potential in sports but says that sporting Christians have not been able to harness it “in ways that affirm and celebrate their own worldview.”<sup>7</sup> Many researchers of “Sportianity” find the culture of modern sports morally incongruous with Christian living.<sup>8</sup> To the extent that they *are* aligned, they say, the project is pragmatic.

At first glance, the relationship between evangelical Protestantism and mixed martial arts certainly looks utilitarian, intended to attract and convert the unchurched. Churches that host MMA events often do so with this goal in mind. Since the 1970s, Protestant Christianity has become “seeker” oriented.<sup>9</sup> In an effort to attract demographics that often shy away from them, churches try to cater to various identity groups and lifestyles.<sup>10</sup> Yet seekers who find a church that celebrates their identity as an ultimate fighter are doing more than joining a religious community that exercises and strengthens their role as an athlete. They are also exercising and strengthening their religious identity by playing their sport.

Michael Borer and Tyler Schafer suggest that Christian fans of MMA draw meaning and morality from two separate cultural “tool-kits,” two different moral orders: “turning the other cheek” and “knock him out.”<sup>11</sup> This article illustrates how these two systems can meet. Rejecting the idea that modern-day muscular Christianity is superficial, I argue that partnerships such as that between Christianity and mixed martial arts have preserved some of the theology, ideology, and impetus behind turn-of-the-twentieth-century muscular Christianity: that through improvement to the physical body, one improves the spiritual self; that through physical activity, one embodies religious virtues and ideals of godly manhood. In the discourse of Christian MMA, the body—its relationship to God and to masculinity—is an important part of the message, not merely supplemental to it. The link fits into an evangelical social program that goes beyond gaining converts to building better disciples and better men.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Christian mixed martial artists (and churches that associate with them) seem to be truer descendants of the muscular Christian legacy than those individuals or groups who participate in both religion and sport without making a conscious effort to link the two—Christian athletes for whom religion is neither enacted nor embodied.

In the following pages, I identify the theological, ideological, and cultural continuities between the muscular Christianity of the last century and Christian MMA. By analyzing blogs, videos, interviews from magazines, newspapers, and websites, and sermons preached on ultimate fighting, I show that preachers and Christian practitioners of the sport paint a picture of a masculine, muscular Jesus not very different from the image that reigned a century ago. Like their predecessors, they emphasize the spiritual benefits of physical improvement. Certain values (discipline and self-sacrifice), theological positions (premillennialism, life as a struggle, Jesus as the focus of religion), and social agendas (addressing masculine aggression and religious and cultural effeminacy) characterize both turn-of-the-century muscular Christianity and Christian MMA today. The image of a manly, athletic Jesus is central to both movements. While some scholars dismiss the nondenominational evangelical focus on Christ at the expense of doctrine as a rudimentary theology, it is, in fact, an important part of the muscular Christian creed. This is a “theology of the body” in which body, mind, and spirit are inextricably linked. For evangelical Christians, the image of a manly Jesus who did not “tap out” (or quit) has theological and ideological meaning in and of itself. The muscular male is an embodiment of Christian virtue and of a strong, assertive, breadwinning masculine ideal to which evangelical men are encouraged to aspire.<sup>13</sup>

This study contributes to the growing literature on lived religion—faith as it is experienced in the lives of believers. Theologies, ideologies, practices, and possibilities all come together in the actual experience of faith. Lived religion, writes Robert Orsi, is “not about practice rather than ideas, but about ideas, gestures, imaginings, all as media of engagement with the world.”<sup>14</sup> Studies of lived religion increasingly look at the role of the body in shaping and strengthening belief—of “knowing” and experiencing religious truth. Many of these studies focus on explicitly religious practices or physical experiences. Others examine the blurring of the sacred and secular in American religion—the reverent way fans talk about their baseball stadium, for example, or the repurposing of commercial slogans on Christian T-shirts.<sup>15</sup> For scholars of lived religion, the mingling of the profane with the sacred does not water down religious experiences or expressions. American religious historian R. Laurence Moore maintains that what some people see as the “shallowness” of American religion can be better described as “failure to try to maintain a sharp distinction between the sacred and the secular.”<sup>16</sup>

Not only do sacred and secular intermix in American culture, secular practices—including sports—can play meaningful roles in the religious lives of individual believers. Robert Wuthnow has written on the power of creating music or art to inspire religious feeling; scholars including Beth Graybill, Linda Arthur, and Colleen McDannell have written on the role that clothing plays in representing and reinforcing religious belief; Lynne Gerber and R. Marie Griffith have examined the religious reasoning, results, and rhetoric of dieting; and Courtney Bender has found religion in the secular space of a soup kitchen—to name a few. In the field of sports, John Sexton argues that baseball—with its blessings and curses, saints and sinners, miracles, faith, and doubt—can be a way of getting at the “ineffable” part of existence that religious believers might characterize as God.<sup>17</sup>

I argue that this meaningful mixing of sacred and secular applies to Christian MMA, as well. Referencing Loïc Wacquant’s work on boxing and the “pugilistic habitus,” I suggest that “secular” athletic identities not only coincide with “religious” ones but that they may even reinforce one another.<sup>18</sup> Looking at the rhetoric of Christian MMA can help us understand the ways in which bodies—symbolically gendered and physically present—are incorporated into and signify within evangelical Christianity. By demonstrating that Christian ultimate fighting has theological and ideological ties to muscular Christianity, I challenge scholars to rethink established histories of the movement’s evolution and consider further possibilities for the ways that sacred and secular interact, particularly within the body of the athlete.

### **Building Bodies, Minds, and Spirits at the Turn of the Century**

In the late nineteenth century, the story goes—probably not for the first time, and certainly not for the last—masculinity underwent a crisis. As the frontier closed and white-collar office jobs replaced manual labor, male proving grounds seemed to disappear. The “self-made man” no longer had a clear place in society.<sup>19</sup> Reformers bemoaned these changes, worrying that modern life made men effete and effeminate. Cities sapped men of their energy, and comfortable living was sure to ruin both moral and bodily fibers.<sup>20</sup> Scientists and thinkers linked “overcivilization” to racial degeneracy through evolution, positing that bodies changed over time based on use and that civilized races exhibited self-control and a high capacity for sentimental feeling.<sup>21</sup> However, too much sentiment (not incidentally the mark of the feminine) impeded racial progress.<sup>22</sup> Thus, for the white race to continue to shape the course of its evolution, white males needed to be appropriately manly.

Alongside these ideas about race, gender, and civilization, a general “sense of unreality” veiled the nation.<sup>23</sup> T. J. Jackson Lears writes that people romanticized the “hardness and wholeness” of the preindustrial craftsman and sought “intense experience” as a way to “recapture an elusive ‘real life.’”<sup>24</sup> Concerns about the vitality of individuals mirrored worries about the health of the nation, as race and class prejudices combined with urbanization.<sup>25</sup> Living in a small town was no solution, for the accompanying cult of domesticity could be just as emasculating as life in a city. Separate-sphere ideology had put mothers in charge of raising, teaching, and Christianizing children. In a setting so “suffocating” to an independent male, reformers worried that boys would never learn to be manly and end up as criminals.<sup>26</sup> The nation had a “boy problem” on its hands, and many men felt an urgent desire to assert their virility.<sup>27</sup>

Recreation served as a good prophylactic against effeminacy, and sports gained popularity in this era. Americans became obsessed with fitness as the state of the physical body was rhetorically tied to the state of one’s character and mind. Interest in fasting and other sorts of physical regimens increased as people saw bodily discipline and improvement as ways of fostering manliness and morality.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the relationship between body, mind, and character was particularly important as it applied to gender. Manliness—that is, the noble characteristics associated with gentlemanly manhood—was under scrutiny. A model of proper “masculinity” was, thus, reformulated around the idealized male body (much more muscular than it had been in the 1860s) and its associated behaviors (risky, aggressive,

and adventurous).<sup>29</sup> A man's physical self embodied his masculine virtue; his behavior showcased it. No longer attainable simply by possessing male genitalia, writes Michael Kimmel, "masculinity was now something that had to be constantly demonstrated," reasserted, and reaffirmed.<sup>30</sup>

The best way to assert masculinity was by living "the strenuous life," working hard, and getting in touch with one's "inner savage." In much the same spirit that modern men join MMA gyms, Victorians read westerns and fraternized in male-only organizations.<sup>31</sup> "Action" and "experience" became virtues in and of themselves.<sup>32</sup> This "cult of experience," says Lears, "became a cult of violence." Fighting became more socially acceptable,<sup>33</sup> and psychologist G. Stanley Hall preached that boys needed more sanctioned outlets (such as boxing) for their anger.<sup>34</sup> As people began to sense that modern life was somehow unreal, men's instinctive wildness came to represent that which made them truly human. Experiences—especially violent ones—people thought, could make men feel alive. This mirrors the discourse surrounding Christian MMA, in which experience and action (whether athletic or part of a call for Christian reform) are generally violent and where "real" experience is highly valued.<sup>35</sup> Far from representing degeneracy, primitive aggression—properly done—supported nineteenth-century desires to be civilized. "Respectable society," writes Richard Briggs Stott, promoted a "scientific boxing and sparring: a restrained fighting."<sup>36</sup> The emphasis on precise and controlled aggression foreshadows the discourse of mixed martial artists and fans, many of whom compare MMA to chess and report enjoying the sport for its high level of technical skill.<sup>37</sup>

Feminization was no less a "problem" in the religious realm than it was in secular society. Since the late 1600s, women had outnumbered men in U.S. churches.<sup>38</sup> This had been of some concern to evangelicals, who worried about the interpretation of their emotion- and body-focused faith as womanly.<sup>39</sup> That fear became more widespread in the nineteenth century. Not only were women now responsible for religious education but they themselves also came to embody Christian morals. "While men had once been guardians of virtue," writes Stephen Prothero, "they increasingly came to be associated with aggression, competitiveness, and guilt. . . . Women were now thought to exemplify Christian values such as submissiveness."<sup>40</sup> At the same time, the image and character of Christ assumed qualities marked as feminine in Victorian America. This makeover was both aesthetic and theological. Depictions often feminized Jesus' features and portrayed him as either childlike or maternal.<sup>41</sup> During the Second Great Awakening, God was reimagined as loving, and Jesus became more

human.<sup>42</sup> Hymns spoke of Jesus as a friend—a “sweet savior” who was docile, domestic, nurturing, and full of self-sacrificial love—a reflection of turn-of-the-century feminine ideals.<sup>43</sup> Putting Jesus in the spotlight was a move away from the distanced first-person God of Calvinism, a religion Ann Douglas says was characterized by “a toughness, a sternness, an intellectual rigor which our society then and since has been accustomed to identify with ‘masculinity.’”<sup>44</sup> Calvinism “assumed, and expected, pain,” she says.<sup>45</sup> Life was hard; faith was a struggle. In the sentimentalized Christianity of mid-century, however, pain disappeared. Interest in theology waned, and religion became more private, domestic, and inwardly focused.<sup>46</sup> Men’s attendance at Protestant churches dropped.<sup>47</sup> To the muscular Christians, it seemed that Christianity itself had been redefined as feminine.

Masculinization “tactics” like drinking and cursing were not available to religious reformers as they conflicted with Christian doctrine, but physical fitness was. Connecting bodily and spiritual health, muscular Christians hoped to improve themselves, society, and rates of male attendance at their churches. They embraced sports as a means of moral self-improvement, drawing people to the faith and redirecting masculine aggression that might otherwise manifest itself in socially unacceptable ways.<sup>48</sup> Muscular Christian rhetoric filled churches as pastors preached about the virtues of health and sport, or as athletes gave impassioned speeches invoking a manly Christ.<sup>49</sup> It appeared in reform movements, such as Men and Religion Forward, a series of revivals and social campaigns that reported great success in increasing male attendance at some churches.<sup>50</sup> The YMCA—a gymnastic organization that hosted Bible studies—epitomized the spirit of muscular Christianity, striving to serve “the whole person . . . spiritual, mental, and social as well as the physical.”<sup>51</sup>

In its original British incarnation, muscular Christianity was less about actual muscle than muscle as metaphor. Two writers frequently associated with the movement—Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes—believed that Christian bodies should be fit but were primarily interested in using the healthy body (a “likeness” of Christ) for Christian service.<sup>52</sup> In his book *The Manliness of Christ*, Hughes cautions readers not to confuse athleticism with manly virtue: “Let us bear well in mind that athleticism is not what we mean here. True manliness is as likely to be found in a weak as in a strong body.”<sup>53</sup> Alongside this strand of muscular Christianity (influenced by Christian socialism) ran another: “hyper-masculinist, chauvinistic and self-righteous,” in the words of historian John MacAloon.<sup>54</sup> This is the version that seems to have emerged in the United States. Ladd and Mathisen characterize it as less theoretical and more practical



regarding the use of sports and based more on the evangelical, pre-millennial theology of the Protestant revival tradition.<sup>55</sup> The movement garnered support across the class spectrum, though it was primarily white and Protestant and unabashedly directed at males. The goal was not only to make religion attractive to men but also to make it compatible with masculinity. Resisting the notion that faith was inherently feminine, muscular Christians (in the spirit of a righteously angry Jesus) turned the tables, arguing that “manliness” was a necessary condition for a man to be Christian.<sup>56</sup> Clifford Putney writes: “droves of Protestant ministers in England and America concluded that men were not truly Christian unless they were healthy and ‘manly.’”<sup>57</sup>

### **Muscular Christian Theology**

Muscular Christians “masculinized” Christianity by bringing to nineteenth-century Protestantism elements of Calvinism, a concern with masculinity and health, and a social agenda in line with the secular thinking of the time. The underlying assumption was the connection between body, mind, and spirit—the belief that physical activity would make one a better person. To the muscular Christians, “a better diet, a run in the fields, or a workout in a gymnasium” were virtuous, quasi-religious activities.<sup>58</sup> The body was a temple to be kept in good condition; good health was, thus, an ethical imperative. Fitness advocate Moses Coit Tyler declared, “It is as truly a man’s moral duty to have a good digestion, and sweet breath, and strong arms, and stalwart legs, and an erect bearing . . . as it is to read his Bible, or say his prayers, or love his neighbor as himself.”<sup>59</sup> When achieved, good health was an indication of moral success, proof that one was doing things right.<sup>60</sup>

Health was considered a virtue not simply by nature or because it evinced upright behavior in other realms of life but because achieving it required self-control and sacrifice. Asceticism has been connected with saintliness throughout Christian history, though the particular relationship between body and soul has fluctuated.<sup>61</sup> Muscular Christian-style asceticism celebrated materiality. As the means of doing work for Christ, bodies were considered outward signs of virtue rather than inconsequential vessels for a disembodied spirit. Perhaps participants hoped to reclaim a medieval sort of asceticism that glorified the body even while mortifying it.<sup>62</sup> As R. Marie Griffith puts it, bodily practices such as fasting “celebrated sensuality as much as self-denial, paving the way for a model of virility in which even the most extreme forms of narcissism could be re-vamped as

self-sacrifice."<sup>63</sup> This assessment is particularly striking in light of more recent muscular Christian incarnations. For Christian mixed martial artists, building the body involves pleasure and pain; training is both a matter of self-directed pride and God-centered devotion.

Ascetic, self-sacrificing bodies emulated Christ while serving him. Like Jesus, muscular Christians had a social agenda based in theology: salvation, for themselves and others. Promoting good health and godliness served this purpose, for the spiritual benefits of honoring and improving one's bodily "temple" carried on into eternal life.<sup>64</sup> The principle also held at the societal level; millennialist evangelicals believed that the perfection and masculinization of many bodies would improve the social body and help save society.<sup>65</sup> Millennial theology emphasized the need to spread the gospel before Christ's imminent return; thus, missionizing by masculinizing was undoubtedly a program aimed at church growth—but no less theologically "serious" for that reason.<sup>66</sup>

The serious talk of sacrifice among the muscular Christians denoted a shift to a (less strict, less intellectual and theological) sort of Calvinism.<sup>67</sup> They resurrected the "life as a struggle" rhetoric from the previous century.<sup>68</sup> Abandoning the passive doctrine of predestination, they emphasized human action and social reform—values they considered more "masculine."<sup>69</sup> Whereas Calvinism was intellectually rigorous and evangelicalism focused on emotion, muscular Christians sought a sort of emotional rigor. Expressing masculine feelings (such as conviction and passion) was acceptable, but muscular Christians also assured men that emotional displays were unnecessary.<sup>70</sup>

The theology and ideology of muscular Christianity were supplemented by images of a Jesus its supporters viewed as manly: Jesus as athlete, as warrior, as businessman. Turn-of-the-century believers emphasized the earthly Jesus more than the ephemeral.<sup>71</sup> Bruce Barton, author of *A Young Man's Jesus* (1914) and *The Man Nobody Knows* (1925), complained about sentimental images that showed Christ as "a frail man, under-muscl'd, with a soft face . . . and a benign baffled look."<sup>72</sup> He called on "those of us who are this side of thirty-five to unite and take back our Jesus" from such unflattering portrayals.<sup>73</sup> Baseball star Billy Sunday answered that call with verbal depictions of Jesus as a "street fighter" and a "robust, redblooded man."<sup>74</sup> "Jesus was no ascetic," said Sunday, "no dough-faced, lick-spittle proposition. Jesus was the greatest scrapper that ever lived."<sup>75</sup> Masculinizing Jesus did not mean making him less accessible to his fans—at least, the normatively manly ones. Jesus was still a friend for the muscular Christians, accompanying them in "every corner of

modern life," but he was also a "spiritual hero to emulate."<sup>76</sup> Jesus was strong and independent—"the epitome of the Self-Made Man" and, thus, of nineteenth-century masculinity.<sup>77</sup>

The image of Jesus was certainly a focal and rallying point for muscular Christianity. An 1896 article in *Century Magazine* "called for a 'vigorous, robust, muscular Christianity . . . devoid of all the etcetera of creed.'"<sup>78</sup> This is in keeping with a common characteristic of American evangelical and nondenominational churches: a focus on Jesus in place of theology.<sup>79</sup> Yet this emphasis does not mean that muscular Christianity was not a legitimate religious movement. Even if images of a muscular Christ were unaccompanied by Christian doctrine, they did have theological significance. By embodying the muscular Christian ideal, the body of Christ itself became the theology. The images both *represented* and *were* the principle behind people's religious behavior.

### Contemporary Muscular Christians

The heyday of muscular Christianity lasted from about 1880 to 1920. Yet even in these core years, the relationship to athletics began to change. Early-twentieth-century preachers and athletes retained traditional muscular Christian rhetoric, but they started to distance themselves from sports. Billy Sunday, the quintessential athlete-preacher, quit playing baseball himself, deeming it incompatible with a Christian lifestyle.<sup>80</sup> In an article in the YMCA-published magazine *Young Men's Era*, Sunday accused professional sports of promoting "personal success regardless of what befalls others" and lamented ball players' "indolence" and involvement in the "saloon business" during the off-season.<sup>81</sup> In the 1910s, other muscular Christians expressed the fear that sports had become more about winning than building character. Gradually, athletics lost its privileged status as inherently beneficial, a drastic change in a movement based on the link between fitness and morality. Ladd and Mathisen interpret this change as ushering in a new era of muscular Christianity: one in which athletics could be useful for attracting converts but in which the underlying theories about improving society and improving oneself disappeared.<sup>82</sup> It is this sort of relationship they believe characterizes the sports-religion scene today.

Muscular Christianity in the early twenty-first century expresses itself in much the same way as it did in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: in church events and preaching, the rhetoric of pastors and athletes, and organizations founded to further the movement's ideals. Churches put together sports teams, and

groups like Athletes in Action and Sports Ambassadors bring together Christian athletes for worship and witnessing.<sup>83</sup> The Power Team—a group of God-fearing bodybuilders—breaks cement blocks to demonstrate God's power. Just as the organization "Jesus—Beer—Chips" shows films featuring action, adventure, and "redemptive violence,"<sup>84</sup> mixed martial artists strive to enact these ideals, and pastors invoke MMA as a means of or metaphor for attaining them. The discourse linking masculinity, violence, reform, and sports appears in many evangelical Christian settings. Mark Driscoll, a well-known evangelical pastor and supporter of MMA, uses military metaphors to preach a gospel of revolution. He sees this sort of masculinization as a way of shaping young men into "responsible Christian husbands and fathers" and leading the church to victory in the modern culture wars.<sup>85</sup> As Jaime Holthuysen notes, MMA and the military share a similar "warrior ethos," set of values, and masculine ideal.<sup>86</sup> In the Christian arena, the language of masculinity, MMA, and revolution or war all combine to promote an evangelical millennialistic worldview centered on the transformation of society through reforming men.

A *New York Times* story published on February 1, 2010, introduced the general public to the world of Christian mixed martial arts, with media coverage and online discussion of the topic spiking after the article ran. In the piece, R. M. Schneiderman reported that some evangelical churches had picked up ultimate fighting as a means of masculinizing the church and attracting its most-coveted demographic: men ages eighteen to thirty-four. The article estimated that about 700 of the approximately 115,000 white evangelical churches nationwide have used MMA in some way—in sermons, at "fight night television viewing parties," or by actually hosting events themselves. The phenomenon may not be large, but it is becoming established. The youth ministry affiliate of the National Association of Evangelicals now recognizes ultimate fighting as an acceptable outreach activity.<sup>87</sup>

In addition to small-scale events and occasional uses of MMA to beef up a sermon, a few large endeavors have attracted national attention. Xtreme Ministries, founded by Pastor John Renken, is a combination church/gym located in Clarksville, Tennessee. The organization—whose motto is "Where Feet, Fist, and Faith Collide"—runs a "Vacation Fight School" in the summer to teach kids morality and martial arts.<sup>88</sup> Canyon Creek Church near Seattle, Washington, hosts "fight parties" to watch MMA events.<sup>89</sup> The minister, Brandon Beals, calls himself the "Fight Pastor" and serves as a chaplain to MMA fighters. He sees his church as an "ambassador" crossing the border between religion and MMA.<sup>90</sup> According to the church's website, Canyon Creek plans to host "short-term Warrior Camps and up

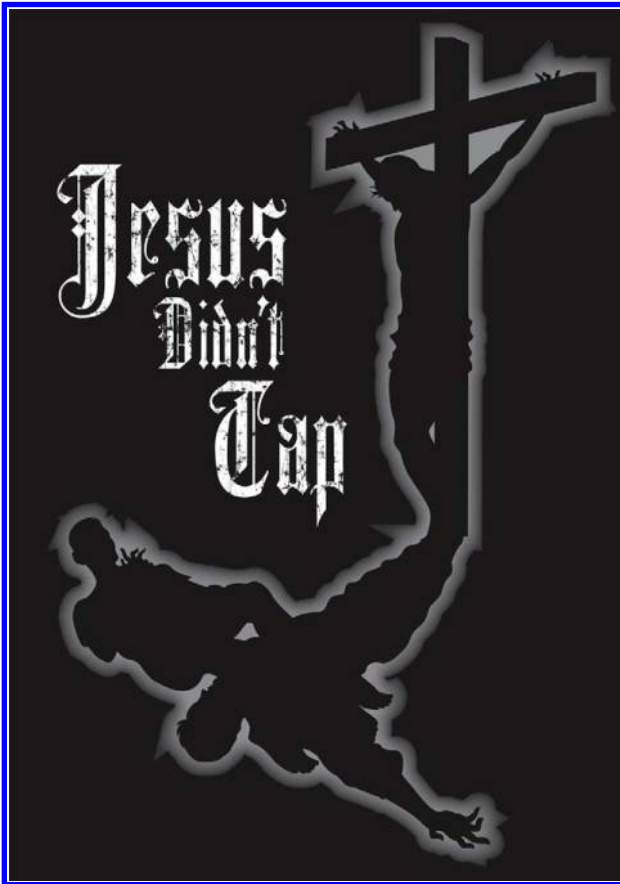


Figure 1.

to two-year Warrior Colleges" that would combine "rigorous physical training and solid Christian Discipleship."<sup>91</sup> On the more commercial side of things, companies like Fight 4 Christ and Jesus Didn't Tap market MMA clothing and gear. Martial Arts Ministries produces a Bible study curriculum called Christjitsu (motto: "Defend Yourself. Defend Your Faith"). The company Anointed Fighter sells MMA apparel and a devotional series called "The Cage of Life." It has also operated a social networking website for Christian mixed martial artists.

Under the phenomenon of Christian mixed martial arts, I include individual fighters who present themselves *as* Christian fighters. Jon Jones, for example, has "Philippians 4:13" tattooed on



Figure 2.

his shoulder and chest. Ben Henderson talks openly about his religious beliefs and enters each fight to Christian music.<sup>92</sup> He portrays his lifestyle as a clean one: he does not go clubbing; he attends church on Sundays.<sup>93</sup> Fedor Emelianenko tells a journalist he would “like to be remembered” as an “an Orthodox Christian fighter.”<sup>94</sup> Emelianenko sees God as an active force in his life, responsible for his successes, failures, and the final decision about when he should retire.<sup>95</sup> Most often, these fighters do not claim a particular religious denomination. They do not generally speak in detail about their religious beliefs. The message they present to their fans is simply that they follow Christ (without “all the etcetera of creed”). Christian fighters do not have their own circuit, and fans do not seem to follow religious fighters exclusively. To a large degree, “Christian MMA” exists in the same leagues, language, and living rooms as the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC).

The UFC is the major ultimate fighting league, begun in 1993 when the sport was introduced to the United States from Brazil. At

that point, MMA had very few rules, no weight classes, no time limits, and did not require protective gear. Fights ended when one fighter was knocked out or tapped out, voluntarily giving up the fight.<sup>96</sup> As the century turned, more rules were implemented, and MMA began its journey from pay-per-view into the mainstream sports arena. This shift was fueled by the television show *The Ultimate Fighter*, which debuted in 2005 on the cable channel Spike.<sup>97</sup>

MMA matches consist of three five-minute rounds (for regular fights; five rounds in championship fights)—that is, if neither fighter has submitted in that time. The sport is very fast-paced; some fights last only a matter of seconds. Wearing just shorts and thin gloves, fighters go at each other with fists, feet, and bodies, kicking, choking, grabbing, grappling, and punching, to both the body and head. Blood flows. Christian videos promoting MMA accompany these images of intense fighting with Christian rock music or instrumental, “epic”-sounding pieces. A commercial for an MMA event at Life Christian Church in Michigan depicts MMA fight scenes interspersed with clips of gladiators.<sup>98</sup> Phrases such as “only the strong survive” and “knock out temptation” fade onto the screen. When an MMA fight is over, the opponents get up, hug, and go back to their corners.

If muscular Christianity is making a contemporary comeback, the octagon (the cage where fights take place) is an appropriate place for it to do so. “MMA is visceral and produces powerful images,” writes Holthuysen.<sup>99</sup> Certainly, a less aggressive sport would not enliven sermons about fighting for one’s faith in the same way. Mixed martial artists prize “authenticity” and the improvement of individual bodies, much like the original muscular Christians.<sup>100</sup> Similarly, the link between body and character—so central to muscular Christianity—runs deep in MMA. Fighters interviewed for Holthuysen’s ethnographic study stressed that states of body and mind are intensely connected, and it is only a small step for Christian practitioners to bring “spirit” into this mind-body equation. Finally, ultimate fighting is new and popular among young men, the group churches are particularly trying to reform and attract. Fans tend to be white and well educated, much like the congregations of the suburban “seeker” churches that host MMA events.<sup>101</sup>

Like the early muscular Christians, these men may be subjects of their own “crisis of masculinity.” David Savran suggests that, in an era of increased minority activism and falling wages for the working class, white men no longer know how to *be* white men.<sup>102</sup> As a result, he says, “modern white masculinities are deeply contradictory, eroticizing submission and victimization while trying to retain a certain



aggressively virile edge."<sup>103</sup> Subscribing to a muscular masculine ideal may provide men with clarity, stability, and a sense of control, just as it did in the Victorian era. Now, as then, sports foster this ideal. Churches, experiencing their own crises of masculinity, encourage sports.

Indeed, American churches are still distressed by their disproportionately gendered populations: in evangelical churches, 47 percent male, 53 percent female.<sup>104</sup> (When pastors discuss the problem, they frequently round this out to 40/60.) Perhaps more disturbing for the faithful: 19.6 percent of American men (compared with 12.8 percent of women) now claim no religious affiliation.<sup>105</sup> The ranks of the unchurched may appear small in comparison with the 40 percent or so of Americans who identify as evangelical.<sup>106</sup> Certainly, the gender imbalance may seem slight compared to the two-thirds female majority in early-twentieth-century Protestant churches.<sup>107</sup> However, the issue is not merely statistical. Some Christians feel that the gender distribution in their congregations is indicative of the feminization of their religion and a broader feminization of culture—fears that closely resemble those of the early evangelical movement.

The supposed discordance between manliness and evangelical expressions of faith developed into a part of the movement's narrative, such that "male hostility to evangelicalism . . . became a dominant trope of evangelical discourse."<sup>108</sup> This conception still appears across the evangelical landscape. The website for the organization Church for Men tells anxious religious leaders that "it's hard for a man to be real in church because he must squeeze himself into this feminine religious mold."<sup>109</sup> Pastor Sam Barrington of Living Stones Church in Indiana begins his sermon series "UFC: Something Worth Fighting For" by saying he wants to "call the church as a whole back to men." He points out that many people still consider manliness and faithfulness to be opposed. They do so for good reason, he says, and blames an "emasculatation and feminization of the church" that is not intrinsic to the religion itself. In Jesus' day, the church was manly.<sup>110</sup>

The sport's focus on masculinity and the rhetoric linking it to fit bodies and fit souls ties MMA-promoting churches more closely to their muscular Christian heritage than do, say, vocally Christian football players or churches that sponsor softball leagues. With ultimate fighting, the spotlight is on men and male bodies—converting them, improving them. Rejecting social pressures toward politically correct gender inclusivity, MMA events and sermons are "unapologetically" male and unapologetically connect "male" with heteronormatively masculine traits.<sup>111</sup> Endorsing mixed martial arts is a way for



churches and individual Christians to assert what they see as the masculine identity of their faith: active, revolutionary, challenging, dominating, engaged. This cannot happen in the same way at a more gender-balanced FCA meeting or church exercise group. Mixed martial arts and its practitioners embody a particular type of masculinity and type of religion that fits within and serves the goals of an evangelistic Christian worldview. As supporters see it, ultimate fighting ministries uphold a “dominant” masculine ideal, have the potential to remedy social problems brought about by irresponsible and unchurched men, and give males a type of manliness to strive for when the definition of “real” masculinity is elusive.

### Word Made Flesh: A Theology of the Body

Modern muscular Christianity does not get much credit when it comes to theology. Shirl Hoffman calls it “a locker room religion, not so much orthodox evangelicalism as a hodgepodge of Biblical truth, worn-out coaching slogans, Old Testament allusions to religious wars, and interpretations of St. Paul’s metaphors that would drive the most straight-laced theologian to drink.”<sup>112</sup> Ladd and Mathisen acknowledge that muscular Christians still link fitness and morality, but they believe that the sentiment is less genuinely religious than at the turn of the century. Muscular Christianity, they argue, now advocates sport for its “pop-psychological worth, rather than for ethical outcomes.”<sup>113</sup> The old “systematically theological approach” to sport has been replaced by a “folk theology of muscular Christianity” based on its use in evangelism, the virtues of competition and self-control, and secular models of heroism.<sup>114</sup> To these authors, muscular Christian “theology” is not real theology but sports talk with a touch of religion.

The focus of muscular Christianity *has* undoubtedly shifted in the 130 years since it emerged at the end of the nineteenth century, and the extent to which muscular Christian theology is present varies with each instance of faith-religion fusion. “Everything we do is designed to get people’s attention,” says Jeff Neal, cofounder of Team Impact (an organization much like the Power Team).<sup>115</sup> For some organizations, sports are much more a medium for presenting a moral message than an embodiment of it. Yet it does not do modern athletes or pastors justice to suggest that the theology they preach is less real simply because it is less conspicuous or more commercial. Athletes may express ideas in clichés like “no pain, no gain” or “Jesus didn’t tap,” but that alone is no indication that the religious concepts are absent. In fact, the style of preaching that Ladd and Mathisen describe

as “folk theology” or that Michael Kimmel calls “motivation preaching” does not seem significantly different from standard preaching in evangelical churches, either today or in the late nineteenth century.<sup>116</sup> As previously mentioned, evangelical Christians have tended to focus more on Christ than creed. Historian Nathan Hatch notes that evangelicals prefer “their doctrines self-evident and down-to-earth.”<sup>117</sup> In this branch of Christianity, Christ is the doctrine. Now, as at the turn of the century, the image of a muscular Jesus can speak (theological) volumes all by itself.

Part of the down-to-earthiness of evangelism is the movement’s emphasis on experience. Stephen Prothero writes, “Just as sentimental Protestants of the nineteenth century have been castigated for trading in theology for storytelling, seeker-sensitive churches have been accused of emphasizing experience at the expense of doctrine, and music to the detriment of the Bible.”<sup>118</sup> Indeed, some sort of conversion experience is generally considered a prerequisite for becoming an evangelical Christian.<sup>119</sup> Yet song and word, experience and doctrine, are not really at odds with one another. Even when it is veiled, theology is embedded in the storytelling.

If theology can be found in experiences and in stories, it is also located in bodies. Wade Clark Roof suggests that a focus on the body has characterized American spirituality since the baby boom generation, members of which see the body as a vessel for religious experience—a possible “conduit to great spiritual awakening.”<sup>120</sup> A growing collection of literature describes the myriad ways in which bodily experiences strengthen faith and make it real for people.<sup>121</sup> Clifford Geertz describes religion as a “system of symbols” that has considerable power to reinforce beliefs.<sup>122</sup> These symbols need not always be objects. Robert Orsi shows that this also happens through practices and in bodies. “Corporealization of the sacred,” he says, transforms a body into “the bearer of presence for oneself and for others.”<sup>123</sup> That is, one internalizes theology (and conveys belief to others) by practicing it physically. The same goes for any other type of worldview. Timothy J. L. Chandler found that the Catholic rugby players he studied adopted “a healthy asceticism as their model of masculinity” and suggests that the sport serves that model of manhood “by giving it a concrete shape on the level of daily life.”<sup>124</sup> Mixed martial arts similarly helps make models of masculinity and morality real in the lives of the sport’s religious practitioners. As Holthuysen observes, “the body is central to identity in the world of mixed martial arts.”<sup>125</sup> Enacting and embodying religious doctrines, ideologies, and virtues can help belief become a deeply felt aspect of one’s identity.

Symbolic practices need not be overtly religious to have religious significance. Shirl Hoffman writes, "Sport and especially sport spectacles possess an enormous capacity to ritualize and to underscore in a metaphorical sense certain theological truths."<sup>126</sup> Nevertheless, Hoffman says the mixture between sports and religion "can result in a strange confusion of symbols."<sup>127</sup> Ladd and Mathisen observe that, "in the absence of a sound biblical or theological background, muscular Christian heroes utilize the symbols they know best."<sup>128</sup> I would argue that the use of symbols familiar to athletes is precisely what makes the message meaningful and indicates that it has been internalized. To an athlete who has trained hard for an event, a passage of scripture such as "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" can be a clear, straightforward, and powerful statement.

Learning to pay close attention to their bodies socializes athletes into a particular habitus—a particular way of knowing that is rooted in the body. Holthuysen describes the relationship fighters form with their bodies through the intense physical training and regimens (such as dieting to cut weight) that the sport requires.<sup>129</sup> Many fighters, she says, "emphasized that they just *knew* their bodies."<sup>130</sup> They talked about mind and body as thoroughly intertwined, and, as they developed the relationship between the two, they began to know *through* their bodies. In his years spent training as a fighter, autoethnographer Dale Spencer found MMA to be a "way of life . . . a way of being-in-the-world" that consumes one's time and body and "comes to dominate one's thought process."<sup>131</sup> Ultimate fighters come to think as ultimate fighters and experience their bodies as ultimate fighters. Thus, I suggest that materiality is central to mixed martial artists' experiences of religion or at least aids their understanding of somatic religious metaphors. As Meredith McGuire aptly observes, "Body practices make body metaphor a reality."<sup>132</sup> The two—practice and metaphor—are closely tied. Fighters talk about doing what Jesus would do, representing Christ, and being like him. Praying with fighters from his Christian gym, pastor John Renken says, "Lord . . . we pray that we will be a representation of you."<sup>133</sup> He seems to see the athletes' behavior as enacting and helping them embody religious principles. Anointed Fighter founder Danny White takes the idea of representing Christ one step further. In late 2012, the top of White's profile page featured Galatians 2:20: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."<sup>134</sup> The verse stood alone, without comment or explanation. White did not state that, through fighting, he could better



Figure 3.

understand Jesus' suffering or that his hard work and training made him a vessel for Christ. But the quote's placement suggests that, in some way, White senses a connection between the words and his identity or experience as a fighter. He seems to feel that his body belongs to or exists to serve Christ. To the extent that Christ "lives in" him, his body *is* Christ. A passage that focuses on the presence of God in the bodies of believers may particularly resonate with White because, as a fighter, he is deeply in tune with his body. He truly lives in it, encouraging him to feel that Christ lives in him.

Muscular Christian language applied by mixed martial artists relates to fighters' bodies and their experiences: training for hours each day; controlling aggression, temptations, nerves; getting up when beaten and bloody; tapping an opponent to submit. Here, at "the place where sensation becomes representation,"<sup>135</sup> the connection between body, mind, and spirit is not just theoretical. Theology and ideology are embedded in physiology. This applies to both Christian fighters and believers who listen to MMA-based sermons or watch fights on TV. But those who practice the sport bodily—sweating like Christ, bleeding like Christ, fighting and suffering honorably like Christ (or David)—may experience the connection as not just metaphor but as embodied truth.

This theology of the body blends mind, body, and spirit in a way that epitomizes the muscular Christian ideal. Loïc Wacquant's work on boxing provides a useful conceptual framework for understanding this relationship. For dedicated boxers, he writes, "fighting is not simply something that they *do*. . . boxing is what they *are*."<sup>136</sup> Self and practice are tied together. In his discussion of the "pugilistic habitus," Wacquant says, "to become a boxer is to appropriate through progressive impregnation a set of corporeal mechanisms and mental schemata so intimately imbricated that they erase the distinction between the physical and the spiritual, between what pertains to athletic abilities and what belongs to moral capacities and

will."<sup>137</sup> When a video of Ben Henderson fighting refers to his "will of a warrior," his outward athletic prowess is yoked to an internal attitude.<sup>138</sup> In the ring, fitness and virtue are inextricable.

"The boxer," Wacquant continues, "is a live gearing of body and the mind that erases the boundary between reason and passion, explodes the opposition between action and representation, and in so doing transcends *in actu* the antinomy between the individual and the collective that underlies accepted theories of action."<sup>139</sup> In the world of the boxer, "reason and passion"—logic and faith—collide. Representation becomes action so that an image of Christ is equated with Christ-like behavior. Signifying virtue means acting it out. Even the division between self and society is thrown into question for the serious athlete, just as the nineteenth-century millennialist Christian knew the benefits of individual action would extend beyond just oneself. The association between body, mind, and spirit, Wacquant seems to say, can be experienced through life as a fighter. Whether or not an athlete would express it as elegantly as a theologian, he or she may instinctively feel the sentiment that Wacquant found in the boxing gym: that sport "'tells the truth' about a person—and not only about his public and professional side as a ring warrior but about his inner worth as a private individual as well."<sup>140</sup> Pastor Mark Driscoll expresses a similar attitude when he says, "I don't think there's anything purer than two guys in a cage—no balls, no sticks, no bats, no help, no team."<sup>141</sup> To Driscoll, MMA reduces a man to his essence. A fight is "pure" because, with nothing to help them, athletes succeed or fail on their own merits. When success is based—to some degree—on faith and upright living, a fighter's behavior in the ring does, indeed, speak the truth.<sup>142</sup>

### The Muscular Theology of Christian Mixed Martial Arts

The relationship Wacquant suggests between soul and body was a key element of turn-of-the-century muscular Christianity and one that scholars often argue has been lost in the movement's more recent versions. Yet explicitly as well as intuitively, many modern athletes and believers sense that sports are inherently good for the body as well as the soul. Conversely, spiritual development can also be corporeally uplifting. Joe Boyd, pastor of Aviator Church in Kansas, delivered an ultimate fighting-themed sermon series in which he identified the spiritual causes of somatic symptoms (such as feeling exhausted). "You are in a spiritual battle," the UFC fan declared. "Now, you may be experiencing it through physical means, but spiritually you're under attack."<sup>143</sup>

Christian mixed martial artists express a variety of ways of relating to the body—some celebratory, others more ambivalent. In his YouTube videos about Christ and MMA, an anonymous fighter (possibly Brandon Logan Bender) repeatedly distances his sport from its physical nature. “It has nothing to do with physical fighting; it has everything to do with the spiritual . . . winning the belt somewhere has nothing to do with your life,” he asserts.<sup>144</sup> Disciplining the body, he seems to imply, is a way of transcending it. However, the physical is not unimportant. Like most Christian fighters, Bender points to the self-control, discipline, and confidence fighters learn while training.<sup>145</sup> The sport’s ability to impart these virtues is a fairly common assertion among proponents of MMA, who—like the early muscular Christians—reportedly value the opportunity to simultaneously cultivate “body, soul and spirit.”<sup>146</sup> In a defense of MMA ministries, pastors John and Helen Burns call gyms “much needed classrooms for character development.” Like the early muscular Christians, they emphasize that the sport teaches athletes restraint and how to harness aggression. “They are taught to never fight out of anger,” they write; like Jesus, fighters possess “great strength” but must keep it contained.<sup>147</sup> By adopting virtues such as self-control, one not only becomes a better person but also becomes Christ-like, embodying Christian values through one’s actions. In a post on “The Church/Cagefighting Debate,” blogger “Pastor Mack” points out that, in comporting themselves with sportsmanship, athletes enact “the respect, discipline, and self-control expected of Christians at all times.”<sup>148</sup> Thus, if athletes behave appropriately, the gym and the octagon are stages on which they display Christian virtue and Christ-like behavior.

Religious fighters seem to sense a congruence between their actions as athletes, their sense of morality, and the “moral world” of MMA. Corey Abramson and Darren Modzelewski suggest that part of MMA’s appeal is the feeling that ultimate fighting provides a person with a space “where the deeply held ideals that make up their moral world can be realized rather than thwarted.”<sup>149</sup> The sport offers Christians who are interested in fighting a setting in which their ideas about character, ethics, and masculinity can be enacted—a place in which struggle and hard work mean becoming a better person and a group of people who also believe that hard bodies represent strong spirits.<sup>150</sup> These beliefs—and the idea that they are embodied or performed through ultimate fighting—are experienced on bodily and emotional as well as intellectual levels. Abramson and Modzelewski suggest that fighters “feel it [MMA] gives them visceral access to widespread American ideals, such as being rewarded for hard work.”<sup>151</sup> They *feel* the connection between hard work and strong

character in their bodies, and they *feel* that MMA is a gateway into this moral system.

Even when fighters do not articulate a direct link between body and soul—saying simply that MMA “takes a lot of heart,” is “very spiritual,” or that they fight “for Jesus”—their statements suggest that they may feel the connection instinctively, bodily, viscerally.<sup>152</sup> Fighting, like many other sports, is an opportunity for athletes to exhibit strength, to struggle, to be victorious, to rely on God to make them into warriors, and to excel. As one fighter says in the promotional video for the Vineyard Community Church MMA event, “I don’t pray to win, I pray to help me do my best.”<sup>153</sup> Sometimes, the two are not so distinct. “The ones that win,” pastor Joe Boyd insists, “they were the ones that trained, that got up early, that exercised; they got their mental focus right on point.”<sup>154</sup> Ultimate fighters are athletes who feel they are working hard to become stronger, faster, better people, and the culture suggests that the cultivation of character traits such as mental and physical control will lead to victory. This seems to be true for non-religious as well as Christian practitioners. Abramson and Modzelewski suggest that the sport’s “overarching principle is that each individual has a ‘true self’ that can be revealed under pressure.”<sup>155</sup> For fighters who are also Christian, the common feeling that fighting (in Wacquant’s words) “‘tells the truth’ about a person” is imbued with theological significance and supplemented by evangelical ideas about gender. If, as some scholars have claimed, ideas such as “‘sport builds character’ or ‘sport builds manliness’”<sup>156</sup> are no longer core tenants of the muscular Christian movement, they certainly seem to be core assumptions among practitioners of Christian MMA.

Both bodily and spiritual discipline generally mean sacrifice, and Christian mixed martial artists relish the opportunity to suffer with Christ. “Look at what Jesus endured for our sake,” proclaims Pastor John Renken. “He goes down the walk that is roughly about a mile long with the Roman soldiers beating him bloody. He faced his own cage in life.”<sup>157</sup> Physical pain and humiliation are insights into Jesus’ experience. His suffering—and particularly his endurance—are inspiring. Indeed, they are necessary. The worldview of the modern muscular Christians is similar to that of their predecessors (or the Calvinists before them): life is a struggle. “Without bloodshed, you can’t please God,” Joe Boyd tells his congregation.<sup>158</sup> Hearing that “Jesus didn’t tap” or “‘Christ was not a quitter’” can give fighters strength for literal matches or the metaphorical battles of everyday life.<sup>159</sup>

This language—comparing life to a battle, war, or octagon; reminding believers that Jesus didn’t tap out—is ubiquitous in the



discourse of Christian MMA. Most often the "tap out" metaphor refers to quitting, a negative behavior not befitting Christian men. Submission is weak, probably effeminate, and possibly homosexual. In any case, it is something Christ would never do. Anointed Fighter founder Danny White reminds blog readers: "God would give up his only Son before he'd Tap Out on you. Truly, Jesus Didn't Tap!"<sup>160</sup> In other contexts, it is bad habits, not people, that can be put into submission. The Anointed Fighter blog features posts with titles such as "Tap Out Depression," "Tap Out Negativity," "Knock Out Fear," and "Knock Out Guilt & Shame."<sup>161</sup> Of course, these sentiments are not unique to the religious realm. When Jesus is not referenced explicitly, the language resembles that used in the secular sports world. Yet this does not negate the message's base in Christian values. Shirl Hoffman calls the Christian sports concept of "T-R-P" (total release performance) "a three-consonant condensation of Christian theology applied to sport."<sup>162</sup> The slogan represents "giving it one's all," and to him, it seems, Christianity demands total commitment to Christ through one's lifestyle and actions. It is about being the best one can be; as pastor Joe Boyd says, Jesus is about living life "to the full."<sup>163</sup> A Christian can take this commitment, enthusiasm, and drive and apply it to his or her own athletic endeavors. Though the concepts themselves are not exclusively Christian, they are easily applied to a Christian context.

Some uses of the tap out metaphor are more limited to a Christian perspective. Preacher Joe Boyd uses the phrase to suggest that submission can be a good thing. He contends that people are always tapping out to something and must decide what it will be: "the sin that dominates your life" or Jesus. Submitting to Jesus is a necessary and desirable part of living a Christian life. While "tapping out is an act of submission," he says, "submitting to God is a win and not a loss."<sup>164</sup> Early muscular Christian Thomas Hughes agreed, writing in 1896, "the more absolute the surrender of the will the more perfect will be the temper of our courage and the strength of our manliness."<sup>165</sup> Surrendering to Christ is always muscular.

While Christian men are called to surrender themselves to Christ, manliness is more compatible with domination in the earthly realm. In their introduction to *Manliness and Morality*, James A. Mangan and James Walvin describe the masculine ideal of the late Victorian era as "neo-spartan," a description that still seems apt in light of the warrior imagery used by Christian ultimate fighters today.<sup>166</sup> (The introductory clip of the Ultimate Fighter sermons at Joe Boyd's church features a Greco-Roman-looking warrior dressing for battle.) Promoting this sort of "traditional" masculinity is a major goal of modern



muscular Christians. Faced with a new gender crisis (gender seems always to be in crisis), the movement aims to show that manliness is compatible with godliness.<sup>167</sup> Indeed, as at the turn of the century, they equate the two in certain ways. In the evangelical ideology that accompanies many MMA ministries, male bodies naturally possess specific traits. Mark Driscoll asserts, "As a pastor and as a Bible teacher, I think that God made men masculine. . . . Men are made for combat, men are made for conflict, men are made for dominion. . . . That's just the way men are made."<sup>168</sup> Male bodies are fighting bodies in this discourse, and as blogger Matt Morin points out, "To MMA fans, masculinity is deeply connected to the body." Morin points to Driscoll's "disparaging remarks about the 'fat guys' who sit on the sidelines and critique the sport. The implication, of course, is that the fit guys in the cage are the real men; true masculinity is revealed in the fighter's body."<sup>169</sup> Men become authentically and appropriately masculine through behavior (simultaneously self-serving and ascetic) that has been marked as male.<sup>170</sup>

Early in the first installment of his UFC sermon series, Sam Barrington established that there is something different—something of a fighter—in a truly masculine body. Neither women nor men are superior to the opposite sex, he says, but: "we're different, right? . . . Someone give me an 'Amen.' We're different."<sup>171</sup> The "masculine spirit," Barrington maintains, seeks action and adventure and desires "a sense of challenge and risk and boldness." It needs the opportunity to "join the kingdom of God and together to storm the gates of Hell," to "change the world, taking it by force, in spite of impossible odds." He believes that the Christianity of the Bible provided all of this but that, somewhere along the line—due to separate sphere ideology or various other factors—religion and religious men became "soft." "So real men visit our churches, look around at the soft males sitting in the soft pews, and beat a path to the exit," he says, in a sermon that echoes muscular Christian assertions that men do not want religion to be a "flowery bed of ease."<sup>172</sup> "Real men don't want to be safe," Barrington continues. "They want to be dangerous. . . . What if spirituality became defined by bold actions for the kingdom of God?" Defining spirituality as "bold actions" and defining masculinity through the love of bold actions tie manliness and godliness quite closely together. Barrington points out that the first people Jesus called were men (and manly, "roughneck, blue-collar fisherman" at that).<sup>173</sup> Masculine bodies, in the rhetoric of Christian MMA, are active, and they are hard. Training to be an ultimate fighter shapes bodies and men to fit this ideal.

If promoting traditional gender roles is the first part of an evangelical social program supported by religious fighters, using

these roles to reform society is the second. This agenda of conversion and societal improvement, like that of the millennialist evangelicals of the past century, is based on masculinizing Christians and Christianizing males. Masculine bodies are well suited to and necessary for bringing about social reform because they desire action, revolution, and challenge and because they themselves embody Christian virtues and signify godly manhood. Like their nineteenth-century predecessors, proponents of MMA hope to combat feminization in the church as well as other social problems brought about by divorce and the lack of responsible fathers in the home.<sup>174</sup> Muscular Christians see sports as a remedy for the modern version of the “boy problem”: gangs, drugs, and violence. Not only can sports keep kids off the streets, but they also provide an acceptable outlet for aggression, giving boys (and young to middle-aged men) the opportunity to be temporarily primitive. In this way, MMA advocates believe, a seemingly violent sport can actually make men better members of society, more desirable husbands, and more responsible fathers. Sam Barrington devotes two messages of the three-part UFC sermons series to the need for men to become better husbands and fathers. The minister suggests—as did the muscular Christians—that boys often lack good male role models. Since the days of the Old Testament, he says, it has been “the sin of passivity among fathers that wreaks havoc in the lives of their children. Here I want to see fathers engaged and active.”<sup>175</sup>

While Barrington does not argue that literal fighting will bring these changes about, he believes that a Christianity with some muscle—one that is revolutionary, risky, and reform-driven—will engage men, draw them into church (or send them out into the community), and help transform churches, marriages, and the world. Pastors address the idea that the world is under siege by Satan (and in need of some sort of violent reform) with ultimate fighting rhetoric. Joe Boyd warns that the devil is “not coming in looking for you to just tap out and roll. He’s looking for an ultimate endgame to kill and destroy.”<sup>176</sup> Whether the violence is literal or metaphorical, it seems, men need to feel it is there. “If you have to think about it in militaristic terms so we can get our male mind around it, then do that,” Barrington says in his sermon about marriage. “It is defensive and offensive strategy.” The anonymous fighter from the YouTube video “Spiritual MMA—‘The Christian MMA Missionary’—(Audio Interview)” implicitly ties participation in MMA to learning to be a good dad by discussing fatherhood in a video about the spiritual side of fighting. “It’s time for dads to start raising their kids right,” he says. “It’s time for fathers to start being with the mother.”<sup>177</sup>

Related to the project of making men better husbands, fathers, and Christians is making Christ a better *man*.<sup>178</sup> If Christian supporters of ultimate fighting have inherited anything from Billy Sunday and his cohort of muscular Christians, it is the willingness to devote massive amounts of rhetorical energy to clarifying that Jesus was not effeminate. As before, Christ is a focal point of muscular Christian discourse and a representation of ultimate manhood. Once again, Jesus is portrayed as a friend (in the MMA world, he's "in your corner"), as well as a fighter and hero. He is a sports star and masculine warrior, not (in the words of pastor Mark Driscoll) the "neutered and limp-wristed popular Sky Fairy" that most American Protestants have turned him into.<sup>179</sup> Driscoll is particularly full of colorful descriptions of what Jesus is not, but any MMA-related sermon or blog post is bound to include a stylized phrase or two in this vein. Such language implies that Jesus and his disciples were manly in a specifically heteronormative way. "I don't think as we read [the Bible] we're talking about girly men who're interested in holy huddles and sitting around a campfire holding hands and singing 'Kumbaya,'" Barrington tells his congregation.<sup>180</sup> Such behavior would be incompatible with masculinity, with MMA, and with godly manhood. He calls the apostles "rugged," and Driscoll points out that Jesus (a carpenter who walked everywhere) must have been physically fit.<sup>181</sup> The Reverend Tom Skiles of Spirit of St. Louis Church speculates that the twelve "probably had teeth missing."<sup>182</sup>

Whether or not these pastors equate feminization with homosexualization is unclear, though their word choice suggests it. Perhaps the evangelical fear of feminization has always contained a degree of homophobia—or, at least, a wariness of same-sex intimacy. One attendee of an eighteenth-century evangelical service complained of a fellow worshiper who "'kept his left arm around my waist, and feeling affected at some passages as he sung them, he would hug and press me up to him.'"<sup>183</sup> Yet, while the religious traditions most likely to utilize MMA or be represented by Christian MMA fighters are the same ones most opposed to homosexuality, I have not encountered explicit discussion of homosexuality in the context of the sport. Pastors preach about effeminacy of the church but do not attribute it to a visible gay population. They talk about the societal need for strong fathers but do not rant against gay parenthood. When pastors present fighters as representatives of an ideal type of masculinity, they are clearly dealing with a heteronormative, hegemonic model. The mocking descriptions of how people supposedly imagine Jesus ("basically a guy in a dress with fabulous long hair, drinking

deaf and in touch with his feelings . . .") certainly approach criticism of homosexuality but do not explicitly make the critique.<sup>184</sup>

Nevertheless, the heteronormativity of the MMA arena makes it a useful site for evangelical discourse. As Holthuysen writes, "There is little room in the realm of MMA for anything but a heterosexual consciousness. Every aspect of the sport seems to speak to the power and glory of a conventional, 'straight' masculinity, ironically even with the unspoken implications of homoerotic posturing."<sup>185</sup> It seems that evangelicals—accustomed to charges of effeminacy and fearful of homosexual intimacy—are predisposed to find it in their congregations and to develop methods of rooting it out. As a highly "masculine" sport—combining the "dominance" and "technical expertise" R.W. Connell says typify the two prevailing models of modern masculinity<sup>186</sup>—MMA has an important role to play in combating emasculation.

Proponents of ultimate fighting insist that, to masculinize, the church must drop its emphasis on nicety. This is a sin of "modern" Christianity, they say. A flier for the 2009 Easter MMA session at Skiles's church reads: "For years the church has taught us to be 'the nice guy' when we have really been called to be Ultimate Fighters."<sup>187</sup> Barrington agrees, telling his congregation that Jesus "is not Mr. Rogers with a beard."<sup>188</sup> The pastor calls for songs and worship experiences that reflect the kind of Jesus he imagines. Just as the modern "songs about Jesus as being my boyfriend" are no comparison to the high-voltage, heavy-metal fighting Psalms of David that appear in scripture, the idea that men should be "quiet, introspective, gentlemanly, humble, tidy, dutiful, and above all, nice" is a departure from the more assertive behavior of men in the Bible.<sup>189</sup> Self-sufficient and strong-minded, the MMA Jesus is a model self-made man. Subscribing to the proper image of Jesus is important because the image *is* Jesus. When manliness is connected to fitness and to godliness, Jesus' image imparts theological and ideological truths. As an ultimate fighter, he is ruler of the universe and an independent and confident role model that serves as an example for all Christian men.

## Conclusion

Punching someone with a hand tattooed with a Bible verse, crediting God for a knock-out victory, or arguing that an ultimate fighter makes an ideal father does not mesh with the worldviews of many Christians. To Shirl Hoffman, "any reasonable person of any theological persuasion" would recognize some sports as too dangerous for participation.<sup>190</sup> Contemporary muscular Christians respond to

such accusations with statements about manliness, self-control, and sports as a breeding ground for virtue. Though some scholars have written off these answers as “folk theology” or “locker room religion,” the theological and ideological positions and the social and religious intentions behind some forms of modern muscular Christianity remain much the same as they were 130 years ago. The theology expressed on a Fight 4 Christ T-shirt may not seem as sophisticated as a trained pastor’s, but fighters nevertheless demonstrate that they are in touch with traditional muscular Christian points of view. They know that fit bodies have been shaped by discipline, self-control, and sacrifice. They understand intuitively how these bodies represent and embody Christian virtues. They see as self-evident the links between fitness and virtue, between body, mind, and spirit. And they feel these links in their bodies. I have argued that fighters and some evangelical pastors see mixed martial arts as an embodiment of religious beliefs, principles, values, identities, ideologies, and social agendas. For evangelical Christians, the fighting body can symbolize a strong, active, engaged masculinity that fits well within an evangelistic Christian worldview and takes on religious meaning. For muscular Christians, the body and its practices *are* the theology. They are important symbols—for both members and outsiders—of who the faithful are, what they believe, and what they stand for, or in this case, fight for.

## Notes

1. Joe Boyd, pastor at Aviator Church in Derby, Kansas, “Ultimate Fighter—Week 1,” n.d., <http://aviatorchurch.com/derby/ultimatefighter/>, accessed September 20, 2012.

2. “Ben Henderson: Warrior of God,” YouTube.com, produced by Spike TV, uploaded by lwalmer, April 25, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YUkHDBE1jFQ>, accessed December 6, 2011.

3. Comment posted by revivalhousemedia on the video “Christian MMA Fighters,” posted by sj2737, March 13, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AtVixAPuzck>, accessed November 28, 2012.

4. Frank Deford, “Mixed Martial Arts: A Knockout to Boxing?” *Morning Edition*, April 16, 2008, National Public Radio, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=89662907>, accessed December 7, 2011.

5. William J. Baker, *Playing with God: Religion and Modern Sport* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007). The term “folk theology” appears in Tony Ladd and James A. Mathisen, *Muscular Christianity*:

*Evangelical Protestants and the Development of American Sport* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 219.

6. Shirl James Hoffman, *Good Game: Christianity and the Culture of Sports* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2010), 15, 20. The term "Sportianity" comes from Frank Deford, "Religion in Sport," *Sports Illustrated*, April 19, 1976, 88-102.

7. Hoffman, *Good Game*, 21.

8. In addition to the aforementioned authors, I am referring here particularly to Tom Krattenmaker, *Onward Christian Athletes: Turning Ballparks into Pulpits and Players into Preachers* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010), and Robert J. Higgs and Michael C. Braswell, *An Unholy Alliance: The Sacred and Modern Sports* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2004).

9. For a discussion of the "seeker" phenomenon, see Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993), and Kimon Howland Sargeant, *Seeker Churches: Promoting Traditional Religion in a Nontraditional Way* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

10. Mara Einstein, *Brands of Faith: Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 192.

11. Michael Ian Borer and Tyler S. Schafer, "Culture War Confessionals: Conflicting Accounts of Christianity, Violence, and Mixed Martial Arts," *Journal of Media and Religion* 10, no. 4 (2011): 166.

12. "Evangelical" is difficult to define precisely, but I use it (like Tanya Luhrmann) to refer to a group of Christians who emphasize biblical inerrancy (or divine inspiration) and born-again experience and seek to spread the gospel to others (T. M. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012], 13). In this article, I emphasize the evangelical stress on experience and focus on Jesus over doctrine.

13. The idea that there is a singular set of evangelical or muscular Christian ideals for manhood is certainly reductive. When I talk about the gender ideology of evangelicalism, I strive to base it on examples from the literature on evangelicalism or the discourse of evangelical Christians themselves. John Bartkowski's work on the Promise Keepers identifies several models of godly manhood that the evangelical men's organization supports, including "Rational Patriarchy" and the "Tender Warrior" (John P. Bartkowski, *The Promise Keepers: Servants, Soldiers, and Godly*

*Men* [New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2004], 44). These two models seem to be most applicable to the views of masculinity supported by proponents of MMA. Bartkowski's assertion that, in the home, evangelical men are called to be strong but caring "servant-leaders" and "spiritual leaders" of their families seems to hold true for the modern muscular Christians, who stress both strength and caring among fathers (John P. Bartkowski, "Connections and Contradictions: Exploring the Complex Linkages between Faith and Family," in *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives*, ed. Nancy T. Ammerman [New York: Oxford University Press, 2007], 160). Responsible, engaged fatherhood is certainly an important aspect of the religious discourse surrounding Christian MMA.

14. Robert A. Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880–1950*, 2d ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), xxi.

15. In *Faithful to Fenway: Believing in Boston, Baseball, and America's Most Beloved Ballpark* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), Michael Ian Borer looks at the sacred side of Fenway Park—a place full of fans who treat their stadium and their sport with reverence and whose own religious beliefs get intermingled with their devotion to baseball. Colleen McDannell surveys ways in which commercial culture blends with Christianity in *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

16. R. Laurence Moore, *Touchdown Jesus: The Mixing of Sacred and Secular in American History* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 8.

17. See Robert Wuthnow, *Creative Spirituality: The Way of the Artist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Beth Graybill and Linda B. Arthur, "The Social Control of Women's Bodies in Two Mennonite Communities," in *Religion, Dress, and the Body*, ed. Linda B. Arthur and Gabriella Lazaridis (Oxford: Berg, 1999), 9–29; McDannell, *Material Christianity*; Lynne Gerber, "My Body is a Testimony: Appearance, Health, and Sin in an Evangelical Weight-Loss Program," *Social Compass* 56, no. 3 (2009): 405–18; Lynne Gerber, "Fat Christians and Fit Elites: Negotiating Class and Status in Evangelical Christian Weight-Loss Culture," *American Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (2012): 61–84; R. Marie Griffith, *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Courtney Bender, *Heaven's Kitchen: Living Religion at God's Love We Deliver* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); and John Sexton with Tomas Oliphant and Peter J. Schwartz, *Baseball as a Road to God: Seeing Beyond the Game* (New York: Gotham Books,



2013). For a good introduction to the relationship between material objects and practices and religious belief, see David Morgan, ed. *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

18. See Loïc Wacquant, *Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), and Loïc Wacquant, "The Pugilistic Point of View: How Boxers Think and Feel about Their Trade," *Theory and Society* 24 (August, 1995): 489-535.

19. Richard Briggs Stott, *Jolly Fellows: Male Milieus in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 255; Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, *Fundamentalism and Gender, 1875 to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 17.

20. Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 90; T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 28.

21. Kyla Schuller, "Taxonomies of Feeling: The Epistemology of Sentimentalism in Late-Nineteenth-Century Racial and Sexual Science," *American Quarterly* 62 (June 2012): 282.

22. *Ibid.*, 291.

23. Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 32.

24. *Ibid.*, 60, 32.

25. Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 89-91; Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 28-31.

26. Stott, *Jolly Fellows*, 257.

27. Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 99-100.

28. R. Marie Griffith, *Born Again Bodies*, 111.

29. On changing ideals of body type, see Mariah Burton Nelson, *The Stronger Women Get, the More Men Love Football: Sexism and the American Culture of Sports* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 20. For more on the shift to a body-based ideal of masculinity and the characteristics associated with it, see Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 18-19; Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 5; and Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 94.



30. Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 89.

31. Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 23.

32. Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 118.

33. *Ibid.*; Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 92; Stott, *Jolly Fellows*, 259.

34. Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 90. See also Peter N. Stearns, "Men, Boys, and Anger in American Society, 1860–1940," in *Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800–1940*, ed. James A. Mangan and James Walvin (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), 75–91.

35. Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 102. The desire for real, intense experience (achieved through violence) appears in the book and film *Fight Club*, which depicts MMA-like no-holds-barred fighting and suggests that (post)modernity and the feminization of culture are behind this need to fight for reality. The desire is also a driving factor behind participation in MMA. Ethnographic studies by Ann-Helen Sund and Jaime Holthuysen indicate that the "genuineness" of their sport is important to MMA practitioners and fans. See Ann-Helen Sund, "The Sport, the Club, the Body: A Study of Ultimate Fighting," *Ethnologia Scandinavica* 35 (2005): 87, and Jaime Holthuysen, "Embattled Identities: Constructions of Contemporary American Masculinity amongst MMA Cagefighters" (Ph.D. diss., Arizona State University, Ann Arbor: ProQuest/UMI, 2011 [Publication No. 3452883]), 192–245.

36. Stott, *Jolly Fellows*, 259. As Donald Mrozek observes, Victorians believed that "primordial vigor surged through the structure of the rational society" (*Sport and American Mentality, 1880–1910* [Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983], 66). Civilization contained (even relied upon) a healthy dose of the primitive.

37. Borer and Schafer found frequent comparisons between MMA and chess in their study of Christianity and MMA through Internet forums ("Culture War Confessionals," 175). Fighter Sam Sheridan makes the MMA-chess comparison within the first few pages of his memoir, *A Fighter's Heart: One Man's Journey through the World of Fighting* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2007). For more on the various reasons fans report enjoying ultimate fighting, see Nancy Cheever, "The Uses and Gratifications of Viewing Mixed Martial Arts," *Journal of Sports Media* 4 (Spring 2009): 36. Cheever reports that nearly all fans watch MMA for "the skill of the fighters (90 percent). They also enjoy the range of talent and abilities (81 percent), the fighting styles (82 percent), the

techniques and moves (82 percent), and the competition of it (73 percent)." Far fewer fans enjoyed the purely violent aspects of MMA, such as "seeing someone get hurt (15 percent), the blood (13 percent), the violence (17 percent), or watching the men beat each other up (19 percent)."

38. Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 2.

39. See Janet Moore Lindman, "Acting the Manly Christian: White Evangelical Masculinity in Revolutionary Virginia," *William and Mary Quarterly* 57 (April 2000): 393–416.

40. Prothero, *American Jesus*, 57.

41. *Ibid.*, 61.

42. Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, 124; Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus*, (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1988) 52.

43. Prothero, *American Jesus*, 59–67.

44. Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, 18.

45. *Ibid.*, 137.

46. *Ibid.*, 141, 169, 161.

47. Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 128.

48. Ladd and Mathisen, *Muscular Christianity*, 13; Harvey Green, *Fit for America: Health, Fitness, Sport, and American Society* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 215.

49. Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 59.

50. Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 132. The gains in male church attendance were probably fairly modest; a reasonable national estimate might be 2.5 percent. See Gail Bederman, "'The Women Have Had Charge of the Church Work Long Enough': The Men and Religion Forward Movement of 1911–1912 and the Masculinization of Middle-Class Protestantism," *American Quarterly* 41 (September 1989): 454.

51. Ladd and Mathisen, *Muscular Christianity*, 36. For YMCA physical education director Luther Gulick, the gym was not a secondary or tertiary project but played a "fundamental and intrinsic part in the salvation of man." Gulick designed the YMCA's logo—a triangle with points representing body, mind, and spirit—to reflect this belief and promoted the symbol until the YMCA adopted it in 1895. Quoted in Clifford Putney, "Character Building in the YMCA, 1880–1930," *Mid-America: An Historical Review* 73 (January 1991): 53–54. See also Clifford Putney, "Luther

Gulick: His Contributions to Springfield College, the YMCA, and 'Muscular Christianity,'" *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* 39, nos. 1-2 (Summer 2011): 159.

52. Bruce Haley, *The Healthy Body and Victorian Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 119.

53. Thomas Hughes, *The Manliness of Christ* (Philadelphia: Henry Altemus, 1896), 27.

54. John J. MacAloon, ed., *Muscular Christianity in Colonial and Post-Colonial Worlds* (London: Routledge, 2008), xi.

55. Ladd and Mathisen, *Muscular Christianity*, 20.

56. This did not exclude women from being Christians. As Norman Vance writes in *The Sinews of the Spirit: The Ideal of Christian Manliness in Victorian Literature and Religious Thought*, "'manliness' in this context generously embraced all that was best and most vigorous in man, which might include woman as well" ([Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985], 1). Even if women were not wholly excluded, however, identifying the male sex with Christian virtues nonetheless left women out of the picture—and intentionally so. Furthermore, identifying the male sex with certain "manly" traits marginalized men who did not fit that image. While muscular Christianity may have made Christ more accessible to some groups, it likely made identifying with him more difficult for others.

57. Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 11.

58. Baker, *Playing with God*, 37.

59. Quoted in *ibid.*, 37–38.

60. *Ibid.*, 37. The link between body, mind, and spirit was certainly not a new development. In the thirteenth century, Saint Thomas Aquinas wrote that "whatever appears in the parts of the body is all contained originally and, in a way, implicitly in the soul" (quoted in Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1995], 243). Bynum writes that the papal bull *Benedictus Deus* of 1336 helped cement this view of self: "a self of which body is the expression" (278). Christians have expressed this sentiment in different ways over the course of Christian history; in the late nineteenth century, the idea became "muscular."

61. See Ariel Glucklich, *Sacred Pain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 24–25, for a discussion of athletic-based asceticism. For more on asceticism in Christian history, see Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*

in *Western Christianity*, and Carolyn Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

62. Bynum argues in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* that "medieval efforts to discipline and manipulate the body should be interpreted more as elaborate changes rung upon the possibilities provided by fleshliness than as flights from physicality" (6). The simultaneous subjugation and celebration of the flesh seems to be a repeated theme in the history of Christianity. For a discussion of the turn-of-the-century interest in the Middle Ages, see Lears, *No Place of Grace*.

63. Griffith, *Born Again Bodies*, 131. Mrozek suggests that this "sometimes narcissistic pursuit of the perfect body as the badge of the perfect personality and soul was, ironically, a reconciliation of materialism with moral perfectionism." Only through the creation of such a discourse, he says, could sports and religion be aligned. Mrozek, *Sport and American Mentality*, 230.

64. Green, *Fit for America*, 182.

65. *Ibid.*

66. Ladd and Mathisen, *Muscular Christianity*, 55.

67. Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 40.

68. E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 232.

69. David S. Reynolds, "The Feminization Controversy: Sexual Stereotypes and the Paradoxes of Piety in Nineteenth-Century America," *New England Quarterly* 53 (March 1980): 106.

70. Bendroth, *Fundamentalism and Gender*, 23.

71. Mrozek, *Sport and American Mentality*, 202.

72. Bruce Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1925), available online, The Grow Foundation, [http://thegrowfoundation.com/The\\_Man\\_Nobody\\_Know.pdf](http://thegrowfoundation.com/The_Man_Nobody_Know.pdf), accessed September 13, 2012.

73. Bruce Barton, *A Young Man's Jesus* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1914), available online, New York Public Library Internet Archive, <http://archive.org/stream/youngmansjesus00bart#page/n9/mode2up>, accessed September 13, 2012.

74. Quoted in Prothero, *American Jesus*, 96; Bendroth, *Fundamentalism and Gender*, 24.

75. Quoted in Bendroth, *Fundamentalism and Gender*, 24; Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, 327.

76. Prothero, *American Jesus*, 101.

77. Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 143.

78. Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 224.

79. Prothero, *American Jesus*, 14.

80. Ladd and Mathisen, *Muscular Christianity*, 81.

81. Quoted in *ibid.*, 80.

82. *Ibid.*, 82.

83. Charles S. Prebish, "Religion and Sport: Convergence or Identity?" in *Religion and Sport: The Meeting of Sacred and Profane*, ed. Charles Prebish (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993), 49.

84. Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 242.

85. Quoted in Jessica Johnson, "The Citizen-Soldier: Masculinity, War, and Sacrifice at an Emerging Church in Seattle, Washington," *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 33 (November 2010): 333.

86. Quote from Gunnery Sergeant Pauline Franklin in the *Marine Corps Times Online*, cited in Holthuysen, "Embattled Identities," 242.

87. R. M. Schneiderman, "Flock Is Now a Fight Team in Some Ministries," *New York Times*, February 1, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/02/us/2fight.html>, accessed August 13, 2011.

88. Andrew Gladstone, "Recapping with Xtreme Ministries Pastor John Renken—Bringing Grace to a Lost World," *MMA Recap*, <http://mmarecap.com>, accessed August 13, 2011.

89. Schneiderman, "Flock Is Now a Fight Team in Some Ministries."

90. Fight Pastor (Brandon Beals), "About," *FightPastor.com*, <http://www.fightpastor.com>, accessed December 12, 2011.

91. *Ibid.*, "Fight Church."

92. Mark Driscoll, "A Christian Evaluation of Mixed Martial Arts," *Pastor Mark Driscoll*, November 9, 2011, <http://pastormark.tv/>

2011/11/09/a-christian-evaluation-of-mixed-martial-arts, accessed November 30, 2011.

93. "Ben Henderson: Warrior of God."

94. Quoted in Jesse Holland, "Fedor Emelianenko Is an Orthodox Christian Fighter and Whether or Not He Retires Is 'God's Will,'" July 21, 2011, <http://www.mmamania.com/2011/7/21/2287291/fedor-emelianenko-is-an-orthodox-christian-fighter-and-whether-or-not>, accessed November 12, 2012.

95. Ibid.

96. Holthuysen, "Embattled Identities," 40.

97. Ibid., 273.

98. "MMA @ Life Church in Troy," posted by lifechristianchurch, October 8, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GIZUpGkr01g&feature=related>, accessed December 1, 2011.

99. Holthuysen, "Embattled Identities," 192.

100. For more on authenticity among turn-of-the-century evangelical preachers, see Kathryn Lofton, "The Preacher Paradigm: Promotional Biographies and the Modern-Made Evangelist," *Religion and American Culture* 16 (Summer, 2006): 95–123. To the muscular Christians, improvement of individual bodies was a key to both individual and social salvation. See Green, *Fit for America*, 182. For a broader examination of the role of individualism in evangelical Christianity, see Dennis P. Hollinger, *Individualism and Social Ethics: An Evangelical Syncretism* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1983).

101. According to a study by Cheever, MMA fans are overwhelmingly young (97 percent of her sample was under 40), white (73 percent), male (98 percent), and have some college education (80 percent) ("The Uses and Gratifications of Viewing Mixed Martial Arts," 34). I have not noticed that Christian fighters are disproportionately white, but churches that host MMA events or use the rhetoric in sermons seem to have largely white congregations.

102. David Savran, *Taking It Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 5.

103. Ibid., 9.

104. Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey "Religious Affiliation: Diverse and Dynamic,"* Pew Research

Center, 2008, PDF on Pew website, <http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/report-religious-landscape-study-full.pdf>, accessed August 26, 2012.

105. Ibid.

106. Luhmann, *When God Talks Back*, 13.

107. Bederman, "The Women Have Had Charge of the Church Work Long Enough," 438.

108. Lindman, "Acting the Manly Christian," 398.

109. David Murrow, "Why Do Men Hate Going to Church?" Church for Men, n.d., [www.churchformen.com](http://www.churchformen.com), accessed November 5, 2012.

110. Sam Barrington, "UFC: Something Worth Fighting For," June 21, 2009, <http://livingstoneschurch.podbean.com/2009/06/24/june-21-2009-ufcsomething-worth-fighting-for/>, accessed September 20, 2012.

111. The web text accompanying the embedded audio file of a UFC-themed sermon series at Living Stones Church declared that the messages were "unapologetically aimed at dudes" (though "ladies," of course, "may listen in"). Sam Barrington, "UFC: Something Worth Fighting For," June 21, 2009.

112. Shirl J. Hoffman, "Evangelicalism and the Revitalization of Religious Ritual in Sport," in *Sport and Religion*, ed. Shirl J. Hoffman (Champaign: Human Kinetics Books, 1992), 117.

113. Ladd and Mathisen, *Muscular Christianity*, 218.

114. Ibid., 217–19.

115. Jeff Neal, video titled "Team Impact" on Team Impact website, <http://www.team-impact.com/about>, accessed August 26, 2012.

116. Ladd and Mathisen, *Muscular Christianity*, 227. If the preaching of modern muscular Christians resembles pop psychology, perhaps past preaching did, as well. Lears writes that, in the early twentieth century, religion became part of a "self-centered" "emerging therapeutic culture" that he finds in "much (though not all) of the resurgent evangelicalism" of today (Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 176, 305). In any case, the concept of "folk theology" seems somewhat problematic. As Glucklich observes in *Sacred Pain*, individual believers develop their own interpretations—"folk theory"—of religious experience. "Academic theologies," she says, "are simply more elaborate versions of such conceptualizations" (9). Scholars of sports and religion do not adequately differentiate "biblical" from "folk"

theologies or "religion" from "pop-psychology." It seems to me that such concepts cannot be clearly distinguished, nor ever have been.

117. Quoted in Prothero, *American Jesus*, 51.

118. *Ibid.*, 148.

119. Bartkowski, *The Promise Keepers*, 36.

120. Roof, *A Generation of Seekers*, 146. David Lyon suggests that the shift in focus from mind to body and an interest in identity and experience are characteristic of the postmodern era (*Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times* [Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000], 47, 94).

121. The study of religion and the body is becoming an ever-richer theoretical, sociological, and anthropological field. Some texts that have particularly helped shape my thinking on this subject include: Rebecca J. Lester, *Jesus in Our Wombs: Embodying Modernity in a Mexican Convent* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Gerber, "My Body Is a Testimony"; and Tanya Luhrmann, "The Art of Hearing God: Absorption, Dissociation, and Contemporary American Spirituality," *Spiritus* 5 (2005).

122. Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 90.

123. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 74.

124. Timothy J. L. Chandler, "Manly Catholicism: Making Men in Catholic Public Schools, 1945–80," in *With God on Their Side: Sport in the Service of Religion*, ed. Tara Magdalinski and Timothy J. L. Chandler (London: Routledge, 2002), 104.

125. Holthuysen, "Embattled Identities," 120.

126. Shirl J. Hoffman, "Religion in Sport," in Hoffman, *Sport and Religion*, 134.

127. Hoffman, *Good Game*, 14.

128. Ladd and Mathisen, *Muscular Christianity*, 222.

129. Holthuysen, "Embattled Identities," 60–61, 104.

130. *Ibid.*, 106.

131. Dale C. Spencer, *Ultimate Fighting and Embodiment: Violence, Gender, and Mixed Martial Arts* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 8. See also



Holthuysen, chap. 3, "Controlling the Body and Its Representation: Fat Guys Have to Prove It," in "Embattled Identities," 86–121, for more on the athlete's body as a way of knowing.

132. Meredith McGuire, "Embodied Practices: Negotiation and Resistance," in Ammerman, *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives*, 194.

133. Quoted in Schneiderman, "Flock Is Now a Fight Team in Some Ministries."

134. Danny White, profile page, Anointed Fighter, n.d., <http://www.anointedfighter.com/profile/AnointedFighter>, accessed December 4, 2012.

135. Glucklich, *Sacred Pain*, 15.

136. Wacquant, "The Pugilistic Point of View," 507.

137. Wacquant, *Body and Soul*, 17.

138. The particular video I am referencing can be found at: "Will of a Warrior' A Ben Henderson Highlight," posted by eclipse30, September 2, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0SMcF4qvcSM>, accessed December 4, 2012.

139. Wacquant, *Body and Soul*, 17.

140. Wacquant, "The Pugilistic Point of View," 513.

141. "Mark Driscoll, Mars Hill Church, on MMA UFC," from the documentary *Fighting Politics*, posted by FightingPolitics, March 17, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ddFbELpXTcg&feature=related>, accessed November 11, 2012.

142. When athletes praise God for victory, they suggest a connection between belief and victory. Longtime MMA star Ken Shamrock says in an interview on *The 700 Club*, "I'm a Christian. I believe in God. And that is the reason why I am successful. That is the reason why I'm still here doing what I'm doing." ("Ken Shamrock: Inside the Lion's Den—The 700 Club," posted by theofficial700club, December 6, 2007, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X60RZ6zm8LU>, accessed November 12, 2012.) However, fighters realize that believers are not guaranteed victory and do not seem to see losing as a sign of moral failure. Christian fighter Vitor Belfort tells fans, "Don't worry, you're going to lose, you're going to win, you're going to lose, you're going to win." The important thing is "to purify the goal," that is, to fight for good reasons and with a godly spirit. Vitor Belfort, *I Am Second*

website, <http://www.iamsecond.com/seconds/vitor-belfort/>, accessed December 7, 2011.

143. Boyd, "Ultimate Fighter—Week 1."

144. "Spiritual MMA—'The Christian MMA Missionary'—(Audio Interview—PART 1 OF 2)," posted by SpiritualMMA, September 4, 2011, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z72w\\_W=MX1U](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z72w_W=MX1U), accessed December 1, 2011.

145. "Spiritual MMA—(Episode 1—PART 1)—'Is MMA compatible with Christianity?'—Brandon Logan," posted by SpiritualMMA, September 4, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t9giFQpsBCI>, accessed December 1, 2011.

146. Schneiderman, "Flock Is Now a Fight Team in Some Ministries." This language closely resembles the "body, mind, spirit" language adopted for use on the YMCA logo in the 1890s (see note 51).

147. John and Helen Burns, "Why Have a MMA Event in a Church?" *John and Helen's Weblog*, June 20, 2009, <http://pjhburns.wordpress.com/2009/06/20/why-have-a-mma-event-in-a-church/>, accessed December 1, 2011.

148. "Pastor Mack," "Embraced by a Macho God? The Church/Cagefighting Debate," *Pastor Mack's Place*, February 9, 2010, <http://pastormack.wordpress.com/2010/02/09/embraced-by-a-macho-god-the-churchcagefighting-debate/>, accessed December 6, 2011.

149. Corey M. Abramson and Darren Modzelewski, "Caged Morality: Moral Worlds, Subculture, and Stratification among Middle-Class Cage-Fighters," *Qualitative Sociology* (October 24, 2010), [springerlink.org](http://springerlink.org), accessed May 8, 2012.

150. My understanding of "hard bodies" shaped through physical discipline and representative of solid spirits comes from Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity*, esp. 163, 171.

151. Abramson and Modzelewski, "Caged Morality."

152. Vineyard Community Church, "Vineyard Church MMA Event Promotional," June 28, 2012, [www.vimeo.com/44873274](http://www.vimeo.com/44873274), accessed August 22, 2012.

153. Ibid.

154. Boyd, "Ultimate Fighter—Week 1."

155. Abramson and Modzelewski, "Caged Morality."

156. Ladd and Mathisen, *Muscular Christianity*, 215.

157. Quoted in Ryan Owens and Alyssa Litoff, "Fighting in the Name of the Lord," ABC News "Nightline," March 24, 2010, <http://abcnews.go.com/Nightline/FaithMatters/warriors-christ-fight-gods/story?id=10180581>, accessed August 13, 2011.

158. Boyd, "Ultimate Fighter—Week 1."

159. Hoffman, "Evangelicalism and the Revitalization of Religious Ritual in Sport," 120.

160. Danny White, "Jesus Didn't Tap," Anointed Fighter, October 28, 2009, <http://www.anointedfighter.com/profiles/blogs/jesus-didnt-tap>, accessed December 3, 2012.

161. All posts appear on the Anointed Fighter blog in August 2012, <http://www.anointedfighter.com/profiles/blog/list?promoted=1>, accessed December 2, 2012.

162. Hoffman, "Evangelicalism and the Revitalization of Ritual in Sport," 117.

163. Boyd, "Ultimate Fighter—Week 1."

164. Boyd, "Ultimate Fighter—Week 2," n.d., <http://aviatorchurch.com/derby/ultimatefighter/>, accessed September 21, 2012.

165. Hughes, *The Manliness of Christ*, 39.

166. Mangan and Walvin, "Introduction," in *Manliness and Morality*, 1–6.

167. Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 227.

168. "Mark Driscoll, Mars Hill Church, on MMA UFC."

169. Matt Morin, "The Confessions of a Cage Fighter: Masculinity, Misogyny, and the Fear of Losing Control," *theotherjournal.com*, June 28, 2011, <http://theotherjournal.com/2011/06/28/the-confessions-of-a-cage-fighter-masculinity-misogyny-and-the-fear-of-losing-control/>, accessed December 1, 2011.

170. Spencer suggests that "the asceticism prominent in MMA focuses on particular masculinized notions of bodily management and consumption" (*Ultimate Fighting and Embodiment*, 65).

171. Barrington, "UFC: Something Worth Fighting For," June 21, 2009.

172. Ibid; Rev. Josiah Strong, quoted in Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 41. Strong lamented that “there is not enough of effort, of struggle in the typical church life of to-day to win young men to the church’ . . . for a ‘flowery bed of ease does not appeal to a fellow who has any manhood in him.’”

173. Barrington, “UFC: Something Worth Fighting For,” June 21, 2009. In talking about a “masculine spirit,” Barrington echoes the language of Charles Kingsley, who used the Platonic concept of “*thumos* or ‘spirit’” to refer “to the combative righteous indignation which could provide the social reformer with energy, an energy of the spirit arising from a judiciously balanced mixture of the rational and the passional faculties in man” (Vance, *The Sinews of the Spirit*, 6).

174. Schneiderman, “Flock Is Now a Fight Team in Some Ministries.”

175. Barrington, “UFC: Something Worth Fighting For,” June 21, 2009.

176. Boyd, “Ultimate Fighter—Week 1.”

177. “Spiritual MMA—‘The Christian MMA Missionary’—(Audio Interview—PART 1 OF 2).”

178. Maybe the need to make Christ a better man—that is, to emphasize his heteronormative manliness—is partially because these groups also emphasize the need for Christian men to be good fathers, a task that some might see as less than manly due to its association with caretaking and children. By talking about becoming a better father and stronger man together, evangelicals are able to promote a worldview that is both family oriented and male headed.

179. Quoted in Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 243.

180. Though I do not believe that pastors or fighters consciously consider race in their references to singing “Kumbaya,” they may be drawing on nineteenth-century evolutionary discourses about civilization, gender, and racial progress. If “Kumbaya” evokes images of peaceful tribal society, the proponents of MMA may be setting up a contrast between modern, civilized men (who embrace aspects of their animal nature) and less-developed ones who are too sentimental and, thus, effeminate.

181. Barrington, “UFC: Something Worth Fighting For,” June 21, 2009; Driscoll, “A Christian Evaluation of Mixed Martial Arts.”

182. Quoted in Keegan Hamilton, “Church Plans ‘Easter in Octagon’; Says Pastor: ‘Jesus Didn’t Tap Out, He Was an Ultimate

Fighter," blog of the *Riverfront Times*, April 3, 2009, www.dailyrft.com, accessed August 26, 2012.

183. Lindman, "Acting the Manly Christian," 398.

184. Driscoll, "A Christian Evaluation of Mixed Martial Arts."

185. Holthuysen, "Embattled Identities," 176.

186. R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 194.

187. Quoted in Hamilton, "Church Plans 'Easter in Octagon.'"

188. Barrington, "UFC: Something Worth Fighting For," June 21, 2009.

189. *Ibid.* (first and last quotes). In week 1 of his "Ultimate Fighter" series, Joe Boyd reads aloud one of David's Psalms and suggests setting it to a heavy-metal beat. Pastors and MMA fighters frequently reference David: an ultimate fighter with ultimate faith.

190. Hoffman, *Good Game*, 192.

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**ABSTRACT** This essay analyzes blogs, sermons, videos, and published interviews to examine the religious rhetoric of Christian practitioners of mixed martial arts as well as pastors who promote or reference the sport in their sermons. In the tradition of muscular Christianity (the Bible-based manhood movement of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries), these fighters and pastors argue that MMA teaches Christian virtues such as discipline and self-control. Linking a healthy physical body with a healthy mind and spirit, they suggest that athletes enact and embody Christian values and ideals of manliness. Some scholars (such as Tony Ladd and James Mathisen) have argued that modern incarnations of muscular Christianity preach a mere "folk theology"—that is, essentially a locker-room pep talk with a touch of Jesus thrown in. Drawing on the field of lived religion, however, I argue that practitioners of Christian MMA experience a close connection between the sport and their religious beliefs. Though the theology may take the language of the "folk," certain values (discipline and self-sacrifice), theological positions (premillennialism, life as a struggle, Jesus as the focus of religion), and social agendas (addressing masculine aggression and religious and cultural effeminacy) characterize both turn-of-the-century muscular Christianity and Christian MMA today. Athletes strive to imitate Christ and embody Christian values—aided, perhaps, by the bodily practice of their sport. Their focus on Jesus at the expense of doctrine does not indicate a lack of theology.

Rather, the image of a manly Christ who will not give up represents a strong, assertive, masculine ideal that fits clearly into an evangelical worldview.

*Keywords:* muscular Christianity, mixed martial arts, sports, religion, masculinity