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# Charles Kingsley's Contributions to the Concept 'Muscular Christianity'

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A number of books and articles have addressed the topic 19th century "muscular Christianity" and its often accompanying topic, public school "athleticism." Thoroughly embedded in the ideology of "muscular Christianity" is the concept of "manliness" - a concept which, along with "godliness," has been described as a hallmark of the Victorian period. This "manliness" was conceived of in several different ways by 19th century thinkers. Norman Vance has identified four basic types: (1) the chivalric, which stressed the "heroic"; (2) the sentimental-benevolent, which stressed loving one's neighbor and performing everyday acts of generosity; (3) the sturdy English, which often harkened back to the past; (4) the moral, wherein many preachers endeavored to emphasize the connection between "virtue" and vir ("man"). It is the intent of this paper to investigate Reverend Charles Kingsley's contributions to the concept "muscular Christianity." It is suggested that Vance's four types of "manliness" are all reflected in the life and writings of Kingsley, the man who is credited (against his desires) with establishing and popularizing the term. A brief sketch of Kingsley's early life will be provided, with particular attention directed to those events and ideas which may have had the greatest bearing on the development of his attitudes. His work as a novelist will be noted, with attention directed to three novels - *Yeast*, *Westward Ho!*, *Hereward the Wake*. A selection of Kingsley's shorter prose works, speeches and sermons will also be considered.

Two important points must be kept in mind. First, it appears certain that the concept "muscular Christianity" did not originate with Kingsley. Redmond's well-reasoned argument locates the concept in children's literature as early as the late 1700s. However, it most probably was the *novels* of Kingsley, and his close friend Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857), which popularized the concept. Second, Kingsley went to considerable

pains to disclaim any connection with those attitudes which he believed that “muscular Christianity” purported to advocate. In his *Sermons On David* (1865) he called it: “A clever expression spoken in jest by I know not whom . . . and supposed . . . to represent some ideal of the Christian character.” If it meant brave young men who lacked self-restraint, he objected to its use. If it was supposed to mean a healthy and manful Christianity - one which did not exalt the “feminine virtues to the exclusion of the masculine” - Kingsley felt it was unneeded because such an attitude had already formed the basic of *chivalry* in the Middle Ages. The chivalric *ideal* had stressed: the gentle and perfect knight, loyal to both his king and his God, bound to defend the weak and put down evil; a man who lived in this world and in the enjoyment of wedded life. All the foregoing, of course, are the qualities which were stressed in novels like *Yeast*, *Westward Ho!* and *Hereward the Wake*, his speeches and his sermons - and were surely qualities which Kingsley was inclined to think that *he* possessed.

This paper discusses Kingsley’s own religious conversions, his attitude toward married life, his quarrel with the Tracterians, his concern for “sanitary reform,” his connections with “Christian socialism,” and his interest in vigorous physical activities and Christian social action. It is suggested that all these are made evident in his published writings and that, taken together, they portray the ideal Englishman as a man of active, vigorous, healthful, loyal, Christian social virtues. Although it is doubtful that Kingsley was supportive of the type of “athleticism” which became a part of many English public schools in the 1860s and 1870s (even though he wrote Tom Hughes that he found *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* to be a splendid book), it must be acknowledged that his novels, in particular, contributed substantially to the social and intellectual climate in which Victorian public school “athleticism” grew and flourished.