

Erin McCarthy
Columbia College, Chicago

The Collegiate Missionary Impulse and Athletic Christianity in the Late Nineteenth Century: Amos Alonzo Stagg at Yale and Springfield, 1884-1892

In the Fall of 1884, Amos Alonzo Stagg entered Yale University an aspiring athlete and minister. That first year, along with forty-four of his classmates, he joined the Yale Young Men's Christian Association, thus beginning what would develop into an extraordinary relationship: through his work with the Yale YMCA, Amos Alonzo Stagg, the most famous intercollegiate pitcher of his era, would become one of the leading collegiate spokesmen for Christ. During the late nineteenth century the primary function of the American college changed dramatically. In the last two decades of the century, business steadily replaced God as the preferred career of choice for graduates, and athletics became their most popular extracurricular attraction. In response to these changes the Young Men's Christian Association tried to broaden the scope of its work by establishing individual associations on college campuses, tailoring programs specifically for the college student, and ensuring student control and extensive independence within the larger organization. These associations offered college men another means by which to display their leadership qualities and have an influential voice in campus affairs. Unfortunately, inadequate historical attention has been paid to the role of religion in student life in the late nineteenth century and the missionary work done at home under the auspices of leading evangelical Protestants, the YMCA, and higher education. Furthermore, historians have almost entirely ignored the significant role and use of collegiate athletics and athletes as legitimate agents for religious work since the late nineteenth century.

From the mid-nineteenth century, the enormously influential ideal of Muscular Christianity justified participation in certain forms of athletics and competition for Protestant American boys and young men. This was the foundation upon which male college students built their athletic organizations. In what is sometimes referred to as the "age of the extracurricular," late nineteenth-century college men asserted their independence in activities outside the classroom, with or without the blessing of college administrators, by creating and controlling autonomous clubs and organizations that were entirely student run. At this time, Yale was one of several college campuses experiencing a resurgence in active religiosity. Leading the religious work on campus was the Yale YMCA, which enjoyed its greatest influence over student life from the late 1880s into the first years of the twentieth century.

Through his participation in the Yale YMCA and his enormous athletic talent, Stagg made the most of his opportunities and was able to establish himself as a respected

leader in both the secular and sacred spheres, but initially, his two great devotions remained separate entities. Then in the Fall of his senior year, Stagg the committed Christian became one with Stagg the noted athlete on the occasion of the arrival of Henry Drummond to the Yale campus. Upon arriving at Yale, Drummond personally contacted those noted for their scholarship or their athletic ability and encouraged them to organize Christian work. Stagg joined the first class of deputations and traveled to many different locations in the northeast. The use of the campus athlete as a deputy for Christ prompted one chronicler to label Drummond's college work in America as "Athletic Christianity." Upon graduation in the spring of 1888, Stagg entered Yale's divinity school and was appointed General Secretary of the YMCA, a prestigious position he held for two years. As general secretary, Stagg was responsible for coordinating and supervising all of the association's Christian work. Stagg left Yale before he completed his divinity degree, but he continued to combine his athletic and religious callings. At the Chautauqua Institute in western New York he served as captain of the baseball team and leader of Sunday religious meetings each Summer from 1888 to 1892. After Yale, Stagg took his Athletic Christianity to Springfield College, the only educational institution where one could receive instruction in a "science" of physical education "grounded in the Bible."

While perhaps the most notable, Stagg's experience was not unique. Athletic Christianity was an intercollegiate movement dedicated to recruiting the next generation of workers for Christ from among the country's future leaders and was a vital component of the domestic missionary impulse in the late nineteenth century. Stagg's athletic and religious education expands our understanding of student life and the religious work of the YMCA and others, among college students in the 1880s and 1890s. Even today, through organizations like the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, we see the legacy of Stagg and his peers and the campus missionary tradition.