



This is a repository copy of *Sporting Messiah: Hypermasculinity and Nationhood in Male-targeted Sports Imagery*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:  
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/96438/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

**Book Section:**

Edwards, K. (2012) *Sporting Messiah: Hypermasculinity and Nationhood in Male-targeted Sports Imagery*. In: Exum, J.C. and Clines, D.J.A., (eds.) *Biblical Reception*. Phoenix Press, Sheffield. ISBN 978-1-907534-70-6

---

**Reuse**

Unless indicated otherwise, fulltext items are protected by copyright with all rights reserved. The copyright exception in section 29 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 allows the making of a single copy solely for the purpose of non-commercial research or private study within the limits of fair dealing. The publisher or other rights-holder may allow further reproduction and re-use of this version - refer to the White Rose Research Online record for this item. Where records identify the publisher as the copyright holder, users can verify any specific terms of use on the publisher's website.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



[eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk)  
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

SPORTING MESSIAH:  
HYPERMASCULINITY AND NATIONHOOD  
IN MALE-TARGETED SPORTS IMAGERY

Katie B. Edwards

ABSTRACT

While portrayals of Jesus in art, music, and film have been the subject of recent academic investigation, what remains unexplored so far in Biblical Studies or elsewhere is the persistent use of Jesus- and Christ-imagery in contemporary advertising. Advertising, while a neglected area of research for biblical scholars, is a valuable socio-economic 'Tollerton' and index, and an indicator of the pervasive 'pulling power' of religious iconography. Western male-targeted advertising in particular regularly employs Christ-imagery to sell its products, especially in campaigns featuring stars from the sports world. This article argues that Christ-imagery is used as a vehicle through which brands can construct and communicate values about masculinity, male sexuality and patriotism, and the advertisements present the sports stars as gods among men, messiahs come to redeem their nations. Sporting messiah images make strong links between manhood, militarism, nationalism and war and construct an exaggerated ideal of manhood linked mythically and practically to the role of warrior.

Sport is a religion of domination and aggression constructed around a male godhead.<sup>1</sup>

*Selling the Saviour: Jesus Advertisements and Sporting Messiahs*

In 2003 Stephen R. Prothero's *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon*<sup>2</sup> looked at the ways that the figure of Jesus has been interpreted and co-opted to serve the purposes of various social interest groups. Prothero tracks Jesus' many incarnations to show that every era (and political/

1. Varda Burstyn, *The Rites of Men: Manhood, Politics, and the Culture of Sport* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), p. 23.

2. Stephen R. Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003).

religious group) has constructed a Jesus to reflect its values, or as Prothero puts it, to show how 'Americans of all stripes have cast the man from Nazareth in their own image'.<sup>3</sup> While portrayals of Jesus in art, music, and film have been the subject of recent academic investigation, what remains unexplored so far in Biblical Studies or elsewhere is the persistent use of Jesus- and Christ-imagery in contemporary advertising. Advertising, while a neglected area of research for biblical scholars, is a valuable socio-economic toll and index, and an indicator of the pervasive pulling power of religious iconography.<sup>4</sup> Western male-targeted advertising in particular regularly employs Christ-imagery to sell its products, especially in campaigns featuring stars from the sports world. In this article I make a deliberate distinction between images of Jesus and messianic or Christ-imagery since the two types function very differently in advertising. Images of Jesus, for example, tend to be symptomatic of a wider challenge to the Christian church, often using the figure of Jesus as the basis of humour to convey an impression of anti-establishmentarianism and establish the brand as provocative, challenging or rebellious. In the case of sports messiah advertisements, however, Christ-imagery is used a vehicle through which brands can construct and communicate values about masculinity, male sexuality and patriotism, and the adverts present the sports stars as gods among men,<sup>5</sup> messiahs come to redeem their nations.

Sporting messiah images make strong links between manhood, militarism, nationalism and war and construct an exaggerated ideal of manhood linked mythically and practically to the role of warrior. To illustrate this argument I will concentrate on advertisements from the last decade (2002 onwards) featuring examples of Jesus advertisements from male-targeted brands, such as Sony PlayStation, ESPN sports channel and Eshe Streetwear, and sporting messiah images of England footballers Wayne Rooney and David Beckham and World Welterweight Champion boxer, the Filipino, Manny Pacquiao. A huge number of Jesus and sporting messiah advertisements are available for analysis;<sup>6</sup> however, I will concentrate here on images that are typical of the pattern of representation of these types of imagery in male-targeted sports advertising since repeat patterns

3. Prothero, *American Jesus*, p. 5.

4. Katie B. Edwards, *Admen and Eve: The Bible in Contemporary Advertising* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013).

5. Advertisements that construct the hypermasculine sports-celebrity as a Christ-like figure follow a similar sentiment to the ESPN advertisement 'Where Men Become Gods' (Fig. 5) but without the attempt at subversive humour.

6. For a more comprehensive analysis of the function of Jesus and Christ-imagery in advertising and beyond, see Katie B. Edwards, *The Messiah Wears Prada: Representations of Jesus in Contemporary Popular Culture* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013).

in advertising are indicative of the socio-economic success of certain advertising images and strategies and so are suggestive of a more potent and dynamic use of Jesus/Christ imagery. I will also look at a sample of artwork from Christian artists whose images of a 'macho' Christ have generated national and international publicity to show that the trend for employing Christ-imagery to represent hypermasculine sports figures is not limited only to advertising but is part of a wider popular cultural shift in gender portrayal.

*It Pays to Offend: Jesus and 'Shockvertising'*

Images using Jesus in advertising campaigns tend to meet with criticism from religious groups almost immediately upon their release and are often 'banned' by advertising standards authorities for 'mocking' Christianity,<sup>7</sup> or are voluntarily removed by the brand in a move known as 'tactical execution', where controversial advertisements are released, displayed for a short time and then retracted.<sup>8</sup> During the period of display, however, the adver-

7. The 2010 'Ice Cream is our Religion' Campaign from ice cream brand Antonio Federici is an example of such responses to advertisements. The campaign, which depicted a pregnant nun; a nun and a priest in various states of undress; and a pair of priests about to kiss, provoked prompt criticism from Catholic groups, and in the case of the amorous priests image, publicity and reaction was generated even before the advertisement's general release. See the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) Adjudications at: [http://www.asa.org.uk/Asa-Action/Adjudications/2010/9/Antonio-Federici/TF\\_ADJ\\_49041.aspx](http://www.asa.org.uk/Asa-Action/Adjudications/2010/9/Antonio-Federici/TF_ADJ_49041.aspx) and [http://www.asa.org.uk/Asa-Action/Adjudications/2010/10/Antonio-Federici/TF\\_ADJ\\_49253.aspx](http://www.asa.org.uk/Asa-Action/Adjudications/2010/10/Antonio-Federici/TF_ADJ_49253.aspx). See also the brand's 2011 Christmas advertising campaign, 'THE THREE VERY WISE ICE CREAM MEN', which featured a traditional nativity scene with the addition of Mary holding a spoon and the three wise men carrying gifts of ice cream. Interestingly, while the Christmas campaign generated more complaints the ASA did not uphold them, stating that the advertisements were intended to be a 'light-hearted take on the biblical story rather than a mockery of Christian belief' ([http://www.asa.org.uk/ASA-action/Adjudications/2012/2/Antonio-Federici/SHP\\_ADJ\\_179903.aspx](http://www.asa.org.uk/ASA-action/Adjudications/2012/2/Antonio-Federici/SHP_ADJ_179903.aspx)). Christmas and Easter are times of year when religious imagery in advertising tend to spark more complaints than at any other calendar period (See Edwards, 2013).

8. See the numerous global news headlines provoked by Benetton's November 2011 'UNHATE' campaign featuring a digitally altered image of the Pope engaged in a lip-lock with senior Egyptian Imam, Ahmed Mohamed el-Tayeb, for an excellent example of the publicity-generating powers of 'tactical execution'. The advertisement, displayed near the Vatican in order to stir up extra controversy, hit the headlines worldwide for a week following its release, in articles that each reproduced the image, giving Benetton priceless free publicity and repositioning them as advertising's most controversial brand. See Riazat Butt, 'Benetton Tears down Pope-kissing

tisement is likely to have generated enough media attention to give the brand free global publicity and a clear anti-authoritarian stance designed to resonate with their target market.

In 2009 the cable sports channel ESPN released this advertisement in which Jesus is portrayed as a gymnast suspended above the strap-line *ESPN Classic: Where Men Become Gods* (Fig. 1). Here the brand uses irreverent humour to appeal to its male 18–34 age group target audience.



Fig. 1. ESPN, *Where Men Become Gods*, 2009

Similarly, Australian bike firm, City Bike Depot, depicts a Jesus crucified by his love of biking (Fig. 2). Here, the suffering but glorious body is a biker's body: a crown of bike chains has been substituted for the crown of thorns, he still wears the traces of tan lines from his outdoor pursuit, a bike wheel serves for a halo, and his legs are laced with wheel marks and various wounds sustained while biking.

Ads after Vatican Legal Threat: Clothing Company Says Sorry and Hastily Withdraws UNHATE Poster Featuring Pope Benedict XVI Kissing Egyptian Imam', *The Guardian*, 17 November 2011, for an example of newspaper articles in the storm of publicity generated by the campaign.



Fig. 2. CBD, *Biking Is Believing*, 2009

Sony PlayStation is another brand that co-opts Christian iconography to communicate the religious fervour of its devotees, while exploiting the guaranteed press attention that follows any Jesus advertisement. In 2003 Sony released an advertisement to promote its console PS2, aptly entitled 'CHRIST' (Fig. 3), in which a post-crucifixion Jesus displays wounds in the shapes of the controls of the console rather than injuries from the cross.

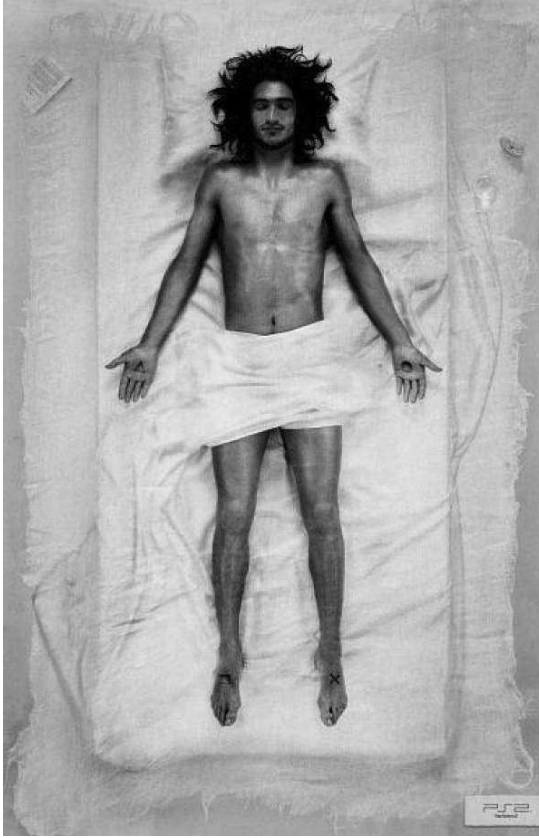


Fig. 3. Sony PlayStation 2, *CHRIST*, 2003

In 2005 Sony released a further Jesus image to celebrate the PlayStation console's tenth anniversary (Fig. 4). Published in Italy, the advertisement received global press attention for its depiction of a man with a crown of 'thorns' fashioned from the PlayStation's symbols, above the strap-line 'Ten Years of Passion'. Sony stopped the campaign amid a backlash of complaints, including one from Italian Cardinal Ersilio Tonini, who denounced the ad as 'an irreverent mockery' that 'displays a lack of taste which conceals a lack of respect. Kids shouldn't be induced into believing that the passion of Christ is a game.'<sup>9</sup> In response, Sony apologized, saying that it 'regretted the reactions' and that the advertisement had been 'misunderstood'.<sup>10</sup>

9. Reuters, 'Sony Pulls "Jesus" Ad for PlayStation Console', accessed 30 September 2005.

10. Reuters, 'Sony Pulls "Jesus" Ad for PlayStation Console', accessed 30 September 2005.



Fig. 4. Sony PlayStation, *Ten Years of Passion*, 2005

Given the guaranteed media coverage and the opportunity that representations of Jesus affords to companies who want to create an edgy, irreverently cool brand reputation among their target markets, it is in the business interests of certain brands to use Jesus in their advertisements; the more complaints the more successful the advertisement. Take, for example, the skate and streetwear brand, Eshe, and their 2010 campaign, *Religion is Garbage* (Fig. 5), in which four religious figures, Hole E. Christ, Pedo Pope, Tick-tock Muhammad and Brainwashin' Brian<sup>11</sup> are depicted as grotesque versions of The Garbage Pail Kids, a trading cards game popular in the eighties, which parodied the Cabbage Patch Kids dolls.

Eshe's rationale for the depiction of the religious figures is included in one of the press releases that accompanied the campaign. While the reasoning for the inclusion of the Pope and Brian Tamaki in the series of advertisements seemed to be based on a political resistance to recent issues of abuse, free speech and accusations of exploitation, the image of Jesus seemed to be based only on the mockery of Jesus as a religious figure. The campaign, which also appeared on merchandise, such as skateboards and T-shirts, was successful enough to generate a second *Religion is Garbage* campaign, which will be released mid-2012.<sup>12</sup>

11. 'Brainwashin' Brian' refers to Brian Tamaki, the head of Destiny Church, a Pentecostal Christian organization in New Zealand.

12. According the Eshe website, a second series of the 'infamous and world famous



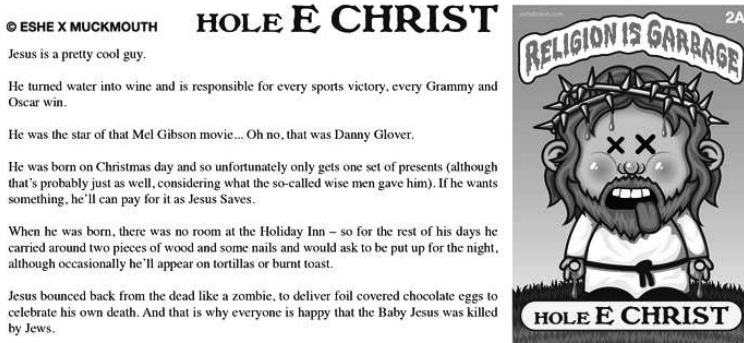


Fig. 5. Eshe, 'Religion is Garbage', 2010

### *Jesus Saves but Rooney Nets the Rebound*<sup>13</sup>

Christ-imagery in advertising functions very differently from the representations of Jesus we have just seen. Christ-imagery celebrates the glorious and victorious suffering of the male body through physical endurance, whereas Jesus imagery tends to caricature religious beliefs. This notion of the exalted tortured male body is part of the last decade's popular cultural shift towards hypermasculine Christ imagery evident in the most commercially successful Christian art by artists such as Stephen Sawyer, and also in the 'secular' realm, in advertising promoting sports celebrities. In images where sportsmen are represented as Christ-like, or, indeed, where Christ is represented as sportsman-like, the image becomes one of glorious victory; it is respectful and founded on ideas about heroic, mythical success and power rather than subversion and mocking.

In all these representations messianic imagery is complex, encoding messages about masculinity, male sexuality and patriotism. I suggest that messianic imagery in the ads functions to communicate male ideals based on a muscular Christianity. Sport is perceived as battle, a battle that is spiritual as much as physical, and the celebrity entering into battle is portrayed as a hero. In this context advertisers employ characteristics of the ultimate example of male heroism, Christ, during the ultimate physical adversity, the crucifixion. Male sports stars are at once sacrificed and sanctified through their physical struggle. The athletes are worshipped, like demi-gods, and the pleasure or pain of the audience is based entirely on their identification with

Religion is Garbage' series will be released mid-2012 (<http://www.esheskateboards.com>, accessed 9 April 2012).

13. This sub-title is taken from a T-shirt sold at Old Trafford to celebrate Rooney's famous goal-scoring skills.

the athletes for, in and through whom they feel vicarious pleasure or disappointment.<sup>14</sup> The champions chosen by corporate brands like Nike become symbolic figures who represent the strength, well-being and fate of their nations. International sporting events, then, cannot be seen merely as athletic competitions, but, rather, they speak metaphorically for the perceived state of the nation itself, and messianic imagery is employed to communicate a narrative of a combative heroic hypermasculinity—and the construction of that hypermasculinity through messianic imagery is a construction of a form of nationalism.



Fig. 6. Nike, *Warrior*, 2006

Take this first image of Wayne Rooney, for example. This 2006 advertisement from Nike depicts Rooney seemingly drenched in blood and screaming a war-cry. Following Rooney's enforced absence from the pitch due to a broken metatarsal bone, Nike decided to publish the image, along with their logo 'Just Do It', once Rooney's return to the England starting line-up looked likely. The advertisement, however, 'was condemned as "offensive", "exploitative" and "tacky" by MPs and Church groups on its release just before the World Cup'.<sup>15</sup> A spokesman for the ASA said complainants, who had seen the advertisement on the M4 highway from London to Heathrow Airport, where it was posted on a billboard, or in the one-day print campaign that ran in the national newspapers on the day of the England v. Sweden game, all thought the picture was a reference to the crucifixion. UK national newspapers all featured the image: *The Sun* carried it on the front

14. Burstyn, *The Rites of Men*, p. 94.

15. The Daily Mail, 'Nike Attacked over "Warrior Picture"', 21 June 2006.

page along with the headline 'Be afraid. Be very afraid'<sup>16</sup> and *The Guardian* included it as a double-spread poster. *The Daily Mail* was, of course, scandalized, describing the image as 'chilling', and reported: 'He may yet turn out to be the saviour of England's World Cup campaign, but the Christ-like pose of the striker in a new Nike campaign yesterday provoked fierce condemnation'.<sup>17</sup> The advertisement's other interpretations as a battle cry from Woden, the Norse god of war, or an image inspired by the Crusades<sup>18</sup> were equally unfortunate as the poster's launch coincided with the first outbreak of serious violence involving England's army of fans in Germany.<sup>19</sup> Labour MP Stephen Pound branded the ad 'truly horrible', saying,

This is such a horrible image and is so horribly war-like that it can only be described as Nike being crass, offensive and insensitive as they try to hitch poor old Rooney to their commercial band-wagon. He should go out and wear Adidas instead. It's offensive on so many different levels and extremely nasty. Wayne's a good Catholic boy and I think the obvious crucifixion nuance is one part of it, but the aggressive nature of the pose is something we could do without. If we have learned anything about football in the last few years, it should be that it doesn't need big business trying to inject even more aggression into the mix.<sup>20</sup>

Rooney, the UK's great hope for the forthcoming World Cup, was exonerated of responsibility for the advertisement. Nike, however, pleaded that they were merely showing Rooney in his trademark goal-scoring 'celebration' gesture and denied they had sought to make any comparison with Christ on the cross.<sup>21</sup> The Revd Rod Thomas of the Church of England evangelical group Reform was not convinced:

16. *The Daily Mail*, 21 June 2006.

17. *The Daily Mail*, 21 June 2006.

18. The crusader imagery apparent in Nike's Rooney ad mirrors the costumes often adopted by England supporters, most recently at Euro 2012. See Nooruddean Choudry, 'Euro 2012: I Want to Be an England Fan and a Muslim. Why's That so Hard? England Football Fans Dressing up as Christian Knights from the Crusades Doesn't Endear Muslims to the Cause', *The Guardian*, 12 June 2012, as an example both of England supporters co-opting religious crusader imagery at a time of national sporting competition and the function of that imagery to construct a narrative of nationhood based upon religious militarism.

19. 'English soccer fans in Stuttgart for the England-Ecuador match on Sunday caused some of the worst hooligan violence seen at the World Cup so far. On Saturday night, police arrested 400 people and banned many from entering the city center. Authorities fear further unrest' (*Der Spiegel*, 'Violence in Stuttgart: German Police Confront English Hooligans', 25 June 2006).

20. *The Daily Mail*, 21 June 2006.

21. Of course, Nike has already assigned to itself a mythic status of divine achievement with its own brand name: the winged goddess of victory in Greek mythology.

It's quite a disturbing image and because the paint is wet, it really looks like blood. It therefore brings to mind the crucifixion to many people, and why Nike would want to do that, I haven't a clue, unless it is simply as a publicity stunt. The trivialisation of Christ's suffering is highly offensive to Christians and to God. This will cause real hurt to people.

A Nike spokesperson countered the criticism of the crucifixion imagery with the comment,

It was intended solely as a celebration of Rooney's return to the team and is based on his own trademark goal-scoring celebration, nothing to do with the crucifixion at all. If we have offended anyone on those grounds, we would stress it was unintentional and we apologise. It is not meant to be an aggressive picture, either. It was a case of catching the mood of the nation as everyone urges Rooney on to great things, and of course our slogan puts it perfectly. The red paint is not meant to be blood, it's just echoing the body paint which fans cover themselves in and the rest of Wayne's body is painted white. It's the flag of St George, and nothing else. We have had nothing but positive reaction to the poster and a lot of people have been asking if they can buy it.<sup>22</sup>

Links between Christ and an aggressive active muscular masculinity are nothing new, hailing back to Victorian Muscular Christianity, medieval European art and pre-Christian classical depictions of athletes and warriors.<sup>23</sup> In *Carnal Knowing*, Margaret R. Miles traces the roots of the image:

since antiquity male nakedness has been used to represent physical strength as a symbol of extraordinary spiritual strength, heroic struggle against temptation, a sense of personal choice, and single-minded, undistracted pursuit of an athletic crown ... male nakedness represented spiritual discipline and physical control and order.<sup>24</sup>

Male nakedness has continued to represent glorious masculinity and these images owe to much to the nineteenth-century construction of Muscular Christianity, which 'has had a sustained impact on how Anglo-American Christians view the relationship between sport, physical fitness, and religion'.<sup>25</sup> Muscular Christianity was a reaction to concerns about gender

22. *The Daily Mail*, 21 June 2006.

23. See *Images of Christ: Ancient and Modern* (ed. Stanley E. Porter, Michael A. Hayes et al.; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997); David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley, CA; University of California Press, 1999); Katie B. Edwards, *The Messiah Wears Prada: Representations of Jesus in Contemporary Popular Culture* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013); and Stephen Moore, *God's Gym: Divine Male Bodies of the Bible* (London: Routledge, 1996) for comprehensive discussions of the various socio-historical depictions of Jesus and constructions of masculinity through Christ-imagery.

24. Margaret R. Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Tunbridge Wells, Kent: Burns & Oates, 1992), p. 142.

25. Nick J. Watson, Stuart Weir, and Stephen Friend, 'The Development of Muscular Christianity in Victorian Britain and Beyond', *Journal of Religion and Society* 7 (2005), p. 1.

in the nineteenth century—fears of the growing effeminacy of the Anglican Church—which equated male physical health and fitness with religious strength and fitness.<sup>26</sup>

*Manning Up: The Creation of a Macho Messiah*

In August 2011 *The Guardian* carried a brief article ‘A Very Muscular Brand of Christianity: Why Jesus Has Undergone a Macho Makeover’, in which Tanith Carey discusses the image of a ‘new, tattooed and gym-ripped Jesus’. Carey reports on the rebranding of Jesus from ‘dewy-eyed pretty boy with flowing locks’ to ‘more of a kick-ass action hero—a Chuck Norris in sandals’.<sup>27</sup> The focus of the article is the artwork by US Christian artist Stephen Sawyer who paints Jesus as a spiritual warrior, a sporting saviour ready to do battle in the ring. His image ‘Undeclared’ has already found fame on the cover of an edition of *The New York Times* in 2004 with the headline ‘The Macho Messiah’ to illustrate an article entitled ‘Wrath and Mercy: The Return of the Warrior Jesus’.<sup>28</sup>



Fig. 7. *The New York Times* Cover, *The Macho Messiah*, 2004

26. Donald E. Hall (ed.), *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

27. Tanith Carey, ‘A Very Muscular Brand of Christianity: Why Jesus Has Undergone a Macho Makeover’, *The Guardian*, 28 August 2011.

28. David D. Kirkpatrick, ‘Wrath and Mercy: The Return of the Warrior Jesus’, *The New York Times*, 4 April 2004.

Sawyer's rationale for depicting a beefcake Jesus is the anger he displays in the gospel episodes of Mt. 21.12, Mk 11.15 and Jn 2.15. He says, 'I scarcely think Jesus could have overturned the tables of the money-lenders and driven them from the temple if he was a wimp. The model I use for my paintings is a surfer guy who's built like a brick shithouse.'<sup>29</sup> This Macho Jesus, capable of physical aggression, has been popular in the US since 9/11, but the *Guardian* article suggests that the growing trend for hypermasculine Christ figures in the UK is due to a feminization of the Church of England, echoing the concerns of the nineteenth-century Protestant church at the height of Muscular Christianity:<sup>30</sup> 'According to recent polls, the ratio of women to men worshippers in this country is 65% to 35%—and too much girliness is getting the blame for the gender imbalance'.<sup>31</sup> Carey's comment chimes with recent academic studies on the dwindling numbers of males in the Church of England. In 2003, Mairi Levitt led The Boys' Project to research gender differences in church and Sunday school attendance in the Church of England. In her report of the Project's findings Levitt states, 'Research has confirmed what is obvious to members of the main Christian denominations: there are widening gender differences in religious practice from infancy to adulthood. Men also display lower levels of belief and less positive attitudes towards religion and fewer report having had a religious experience'.<sup>32</sup> While men and boys may not be undergoing religious experiences from the church pews, they may be experiencing something similar from the sports field. Various recent academic studies have analysed the connection between sport and religion.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the *Guardian* article fur-

29. Carey, 'A Very Muscular Brand of Christianity'.

30. Watson, Weir and Friend, 'The Development of Muscular Christianity', p. 2.

31. Carey, 'A Very Muscular Brand of Christianity'.

32. Mairi Levitt, 'Where Are the Men and the Boys? The Gender Imbalance in the Church of England', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 18 (2003), pp. 61-75.

33. Cf. William Joseph Baker, *Playing with God: Religion and Modern Sport* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Eric Bain-Selbo and Andrew Parker (eds), *International Journal of Religion and Sport* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press); Robert J. Higgs and Michael C. Braswell, *An Unholy Alliance: The Sacred and Modern Sports* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004); Shirl J. Hoffman, *Good Game: Christianity and the Culture of Sports* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010); Charles S. Prebish, *Religion and Sport: The Meeting of Sacred and Profane* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992); Eric Bain-Selbo, *Game Day and God: Football, Faith and Politics in the American South* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press 2009); Craig A. Forney, *Holy Trinity of American Sports: Civil Religion in Football, Baseball, and Basketball* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2010); Steven J. Overman, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Sport: How Calvinism and Capitalism Shaped America's Games* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2010); Tara Magdalinski and Timothy J.L.

ther links a lack of suitably masculine Christian role-models with the popularity of footballers: ‘As the Rev Eric Delve, vicar of St Luke’s Maidstone, Kent points out: “Men are looking for action figures. That’s why they follow footballers.<sup>34</sup> With the Messiah looking like a midfielder, David Beckham could be in for some competition.”<sup>35</sup>

### *Bending It like Beckham?*

What if the midfielder already looks like the messiah? Just like Sawyer’s pin-up Jesus images, semi-naked images of Beckham and Rooney also put their objectified bodies on display for a male consumer. In David Beckham’s messianic homage to St George, on the cover of GQ magazine, he is stripped to the waist and has his arms outstretched.<sup>36</sup>

By the time this shoot was taken Beckham had already graced the cover of *Time Out* magazine in April 1999 as a pseudo-Christ-like figure in white trousers, see-through shirt, with the caption, ‘Easter Exclusive: The Resurrection of David Beckham’, and again on the cover of the Easter 2001 edition of *Time Out* magazine in a different version of his signature messianic pose. In the noughties, Christ-like poses became Beckham’s regular pattern of representation.

Chandler (eds), *With God on their Side: Sport in the Service of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2002).

34. Delve’s suggestion echoes the sentiment of a *BBC News Magazine* article during Euro 2004: ‘It was the national anthem that did it for me. The sight, before the latest English match, of crowds of fans, hands raised to the skies, some of them with eyes closed, singing their hearts out (and, as it happens, imploring God’s salvation, though the words were probably irrelevant), it looked for all the world like worship in a Pentecostal superchurch. Admittedly, Christians tend to wear their crosses round their necks rather than on their faces, but otherwise it might easily have been a charismatic praise meeting where an unusual proportion just happened to be in red and white. It was then I realised—football is a religion. It doesn’t just look like worship, it has taken over almost all the patterns of British life and behaviour that used to belong to Christianity’ (Stephen Tomkins, ‘Matches Made in Heaven: We’re Increasingly Deserting the Church in Favour of the Pitch. Players are Gods, the Stands are the Pews, Football is the New Religion, and Here’s Why’, *BBC News Magazine*, 22 June 2004).

35. Carey, ‘A Very Muscular Brand of Christianity’, *The Guardian*, 28 August 2011.

36. Also, the tagline on the magazine cover plays with the idea about Beckham’s gender-bending status: can he deliver as the messianic Deliverer and as the midwife/mother/birthing father?



Fig. 8. *GQ Magazine* (UK Edition), 2002

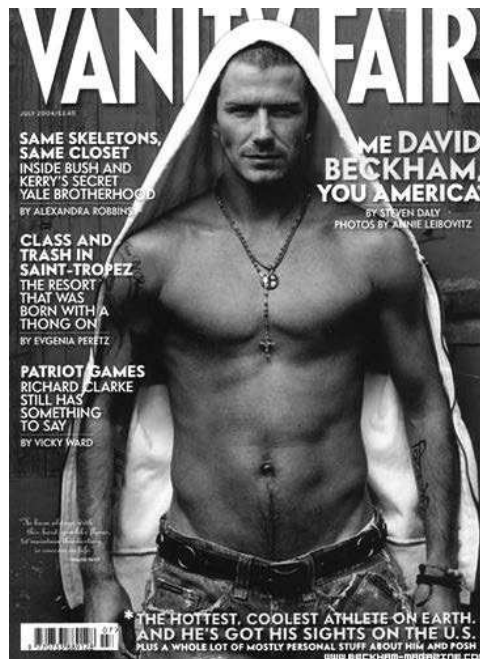


Fig. 9. *Vanity Fair* (US Edition), 2004



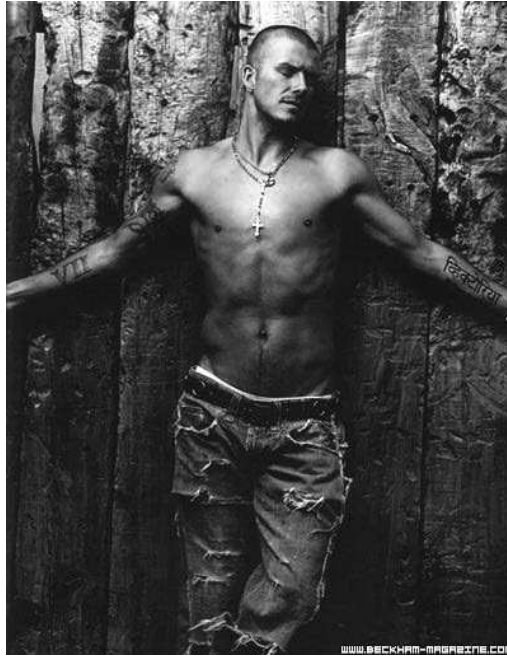


Fig. 10. *Vanity Fair* Photoshoot (US Edition), 2004

This *Vanity Fair* cover and image from the accompanying photoshoot show Beckham once again represented in his, by now, standard messianic guise. To add to his Christ-like public persona, Beckham developed a fondness for necklace crosses or rosary beads, worn in this image, a fashion publicly criticized by the Pope in 2002,<sup>37</sup> and Beckham continues to inscribe his body with messianic imagery in the form of his much photographed and discussed tattoos.<sup>38</sup>

Indeed the ‘popular’ perception of Beckham as Christ-like has permeated more traditionally ‘elite’ forms of social commentary like high-profit art and academia. In 2006, Carlton Brick, a sociology lecturer from the University of Paisley made the national press by arguing that Beckham is ‘steeped in pseudo-Christian iconography’<sup>39</sup> and that the ‘Beckham brand

37. ‘Pope Criticises Stars Using Sacred Icons for Style’, *Daily Mail*, 13 July 2002.

38. Beckham has an angel in crucifixion pose on his back, a portrait of Jesus being lifted from the tomb by cherubs on his upper chest, an image based on the painting *Man of Sorrows* by Matthew R. Brooks on his side and a winged cross on the back of his neck.

39. Carlton Brick, “‘Father, Why Hast Thou Forsaken Me?’” Postmodernism, Desire and Dissatisfaction. A Case Study of David Beckham’s “Meaning” Given at the University of Paisley’, *Celebrity Culture: An Interdisciplinary Conference*, 12–14 September 2005.

is all about salvation, redemption, even resurrection'.<sup>40</sup> In 2011 the artist Johnny Cotter received a visit from the police, who removed his painting 'Listen to Me and Not to Them' from Cotter's gallery in Folkestone following complaints from the public.

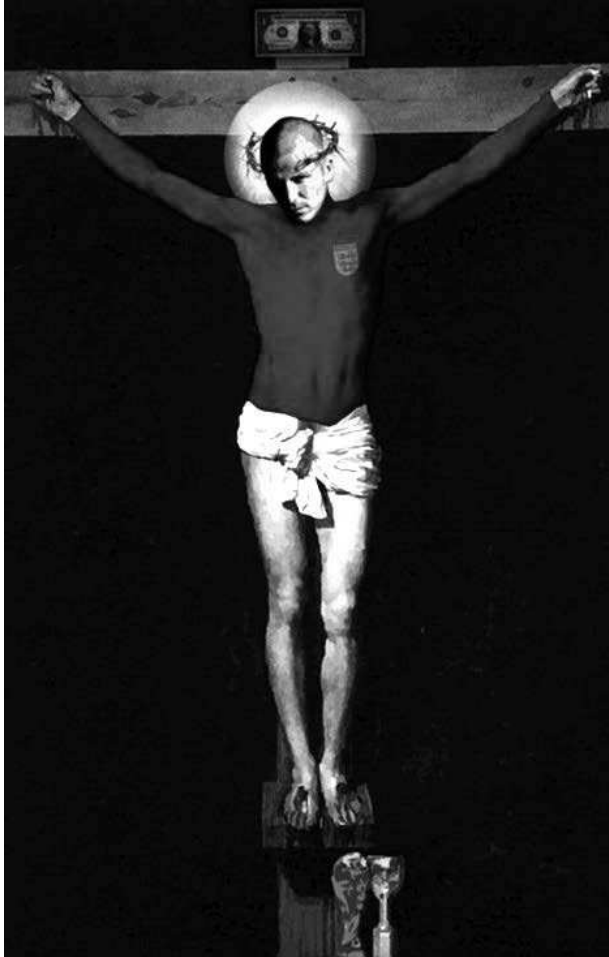


Fig. 11. Johnny Cotter, *Listen to Me and Not to Them*, 2011

40. 'Dr Brick points to Beckham's crucifix tattoo, his Christ-like poses in magazines and his decision to call his son Cruz, Spanish for cross, as conscious examples of Beckham's use of Christian symbols. The England footballer and his wife were even portrayed as Joseph and Mary in a nativity display at Madame Tussauds' (G. Seenan, 'David Beckham, from Football Saviour to the New Messiah', *The Guardian*, 14 September 2005. Retrieved May 21, 2008.

Cotter's press release statement said: 'This is not an anti-Christian painting. The point of it is to question who we worship in the 21st century. Is it God or is it people like David Beckham or reality TV stars who get paid millions and are looked up to?'<sup>41</sup> The press attention generated by Cotter's representation of a Christ-like Beckham attracted 150 million internet views of the image and over 35 countries displayed the paintings in magazines, newspapers and internet sites. Here Cotter riffs on Brand Beckham's many messianic representations in the press, of which we have seen only a very few here, and his painting is a visual representation of Eric Delve's comments in the Tanith Carey Guardian article that sports stars, especially footballers, fill a perceived gap in the young male market left void by religion. Yet Cotter's painting seems to miss one of the key functions of the Beckham messianic pattern of representation. The employment of Christ-imagery in near-naked photo-shoots of male sporting celebrities works to sanction the display of the male objectified body and reassure a male heterosexual consumer.

Male-to-male looking in advertising is notoriously problematic, especially where advertisers seek to attract gay male consumers without alienating the straight male demographic. Sports stars offer a compromise: sport can unriskily be sold as a matter of highly erotic viewing to conventionally 'masculine' and self-identifying heterosexual males, precisely because of the effectiveness of the disavowal mechanism; voyeurism and fetishization can successfully shelter beneath the umbrella of sporting messiah. In other words, the context of these images is vital: shots of near-naked men aimed at men through the possibilities offered by the conception of football as a sport, a suitably heterosexual pursuit. The alibi of the sporting context is invaluable, since it allows the offering of erotic images of the male to the self-identifying heterosexual male along with a near-total disavowal of eroticism. The bodies of partially clad young men in Nike advertisements then are offered officially, it seems, for identification but not to incite male desire. In his study of males in popular culture, *Uneasy Pleasures: The Male as Erotic Object*, Kenneth MacKinnon supports this argument: 'The cruciality of sport to the question of looking at the male, and of his potential in terms of objectification, is clarified by awareness that, despite the strong social discouragement to male looking at the male, the setting of sport uniquely legitimizes that gaze'.<sup>42</sup>

The display of near-naked male sports stars in sporting messiah advertisements is effective, then, in appealing to the widest consumer audience possible by allowing the male gaze while disavowing any erotic potential in that

41. Interview with Cotter on BBC Radio Kent, 20 January 2011.

42. Kenneth MacKinnon, *Uneasy Pleasures: The Male as Erotic Object* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1998).

gaze, thereby reassuring self-identifying male heterosexuals that their gaze is legitimate. As MacKinnon puts it, 'A suggestion common in sports viewing is that these built bodies are not merely spectacle but engage in heroic activities that suggest a triumphant masculinity so that contemplation of them is not sexual but inspirational'.<sup>43</sup> I would go a step further to suggest that Beckham's use<sup>44</sup> of Christ imagery offers a double-alibi for male viewers of sports images. By making the near-naked male in the image not only a sports-star but also Christ-like, the advertiser ensures that male heterosexual consumers are entirely reassured that although a male body may be on display, the double-whammy of sports and religion ensures that disavowal is almost entirely effective. Brian Pronger makes the same point in his book *The Arena of Masculinity*: 'Art representations based on narratives or teachings of Old and New Testaments may be even more strenuous in distancing appreciation of its naked males from erotics, by adding religious awe and respectful reverence to its array of preventative measures'.<sup>45</sup>

Perhaps this is a key factor to David Beckham's frequent use of the messianic motif in his promotional images. While Beckham could be seen to be que(e)rying the description made above of the sports star who displays his body while disavowing the male gaze, I would argue that these images of Beckham manage to appeal to the widest consumer-base while employing sophisticated disavowal techniques. For example, Beckham returns the viewers' gaze, whether male or female, gay or straight. Unusually for a male celebrity, he recognizes his gay fan base and acknowledges them in his images; see his advertisements for Armani underwear as an example. He's posed naked for bestselling gay magazine *Attitude*, for instance, and frequently plays with traditional ideas about masculinity through fashion and his representation in images. This image of metrosexual sports and fashion icon peaked in 2002, when in an issue of the men's magazine *GQ*, Beckham posed for photographs in what was promoted as 'his most outrageous shoot'. Beckham was photographed complete with facial makeup, baby oil on his uncovered chest, wearing a white silk scarf, and nail varnish, and the shoot was reported under the headline 'Camp David' in *The Mirror*.<sup>46</sup>

43. MacKinnon, *Uneasy Pleasures*, p. 74.

44. Or, more explicitly, Beckham's PR team, since these images present Beckham as a brand rather than as a person.

45. Brian Pronger, *The Arena of Masculinity: Sports, Sex and Homosexuality* (New York: St Martins Press, 1990).

46. John Harris and Ben Clayton, 'David Beckham and the Changing Representations of English Identity', *International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing* 2 (2007), pp. 208-21.



Fig. 12. GQ (UK Edition) Photoshoot, 2002

Beckham can engage in this gender play precisely because his (hetero)masculinity is not in question: the footballer is famously heterosexual; famously a family man, with a celebrity wife, and the subject of numerous accusations of infidelity with women who have sold stories to the tabloids about his sexual prowess.<sup>47</sup> In other words, he remains an image of muscular masculinity despite his ‘play’ with image and audience.

### *Saviour of the Nations*

However, Beckham’s Christ-imagery has a number of functions of which disavowing the male erotic gaze is only one. The imagery is also bound up with ideas about the suffering servant of the nation. Beckham has become a modern icon in England, and these messianic hero images exploit and perpetuate his cultural status. For example, in 2003 he was made Officer in the Order of the British Empire by Queen Elizabeth II and at the 2007 100 Greatest Britons awards he was given the accolade of ‘Britain’s Greatest Ambassador’. Beckham is awarded not for his services to football, but to his nation. The association between elite sportsmen, nationhood and messianic imagery is certainly not unique to England. A similar representational pattern is prevalent in the promotional material for the World Champion boxer, the Filipino, Manny Pacquiao.

47. An argument shared by Katie Milestone and Anneke Meyer in their *Gender and Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), p. 117.



Fig. 13. Nike, *Give Us This Day*, 2008

In 2008 Nike once again depicted one of their celebrity sportsmen in a Christ-like pose to promote a national sporting event. This image, entitled 'Give Us This Day', advertises Pacquiao's much-hyped welter-weight match with the six-division world champion Oscar de la Hoya at the MGM Grand Las Vegas in a fight called 'The Dream Match'. Nike claimed that Pacquiao was being pictured in prayer.<sup>48</sup> Betraying their intentions behind the image is the accompanying blurb for a Manny Pacquiao 'Give Us This Day' T-shirt: 'Outfit yourself in glory. Show your faith in one of the most powerful fighters. Believe in the force that is Manny Pacquiao. A design for the most devout fan.'<sup>49</sup> Additionally, in the lead-up to the fight, an internet version of the ad, a mini-site, was available, aimed, in particular, at the Filipino market. This version of the ad invites fans to send their personal prayers, good wishes and dedications to Pacquiao in advance of the match. Even the merchandise is sold in a similarly quasi-religious manner: fans can Voice your Conviction, where support and prayers can be offered to Pacquiao; be Clothed in Glory, where the official Dream Match Nike T-shirt can be purchased; and Spread the Faith where fans can download

48. As a practising Catholic, Pacquiao does pray in his corner of the ring before every fight, but, unsurprisingly, not in this position. Rather, the image seems to reference the scene in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of Christ* when Jesus in prayer in the darkness of the Garden of Gethsemane before he battles death.

49. [www.nike.com.ph/giveusthisday](http://www.nike.com.ph/giveusthisday) (accessed 31 August 2011).

promotional Pacquiao skins for social media, thereby ‘spreading the word’ of the champion even further. In the event, de la Hoya was forced to throw in the towel during the much-hyped fight and following his victory Pacquiao was decorated with the Filipino Legion of Honour with the rank of ‘Officer’ in a ceremony marking the 73rd founding anniversary of the armed forces of the Philippines. This award was recognition for bringing pride and honour to the country through his remarkable achievements in the ring. Messianic imagery then is not just about male muscular heroism, but about patriotic male muscular heroism. The same image was recycled the following year to promote Pacquiao’s fight with Ricky Hatton billed as ‘The Battle of East and West’: the advertisement, then, presents Pacquiao not only as the redeemer of the Philippines but of the entire Eastern world.

Pacquiao’s messianic pose for Nike is uncannily similar to another of Stephen Sawyer’s versions of Christ as a warrior athlete, this time intriguingly entitled ‘Warfare’.



Fig. 14. Stephen Sawyer, ‘Warfare’, 2004

As the images of Rooney, Beckham and Pacquiao have evidenced, in messianic male sports advertising the sportsman becomes an extension of his country—the nation personified—and Sawyer’s boxing Christ is no different. The mood of the painting is much darker than the ‘Undefeated’ image that graced the cover of the *New York Times*. Here, like the messianic Pacquiao, Christ prays in his corner, preparing to defend his championship for the red, white and blue in a post-9/11 world. Christ, still the West’s blue-eyed boy, with his Aryan looks—after all, it is his muscle definition that has

undergone the makeover, not his 'racial' representation—may be as yet be 'undefeated' but there are pretenders to his title; the threats to traditional Christianity and, by extension, to the American way of life, remain.

In the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks, the nation witnessed public displays of patriotism not seen since World War II. Indeed, sports in general became one of the primary areas for healing and patriotic celebration. Quite quickly, however, the discourse of sports, both in the games themselves and through the media, affirmed a presidential rhetoric of war. For example, Carl Stempel's 2006 study suggested that involvement in televised masculinist sports is robustly correlated with support for invading Iraq, the doctrine of preventative attacks, and strong patriotic feelings for the United States.<sup>50</sup> Sawyer's is a Christ George Bush would be proud of, his words to the US nation following the 9/11 terrorist attack made image: 'America has stood down enemies before, and we will do so this time. None of us will ever forget this day, yet we go forward to defend freedom and all that is good and just in our world.'<sup>51</sup> Of course, Bush framed the 'war on terrorism' in explicitly religious terms, regularly invoking themes that constitute America's enemies as the enemies of God, and in the years following 9/11 America's foreign policy became increasingly belligerent, arrogant and militant. This shift can be summarized in Bush's now infamous declaration to Congress on 20 September 2001: 'You're either with us, or you are with the terrorists'.<sup>52</sup> Such rhetoric lends itself to images of combat, with a macho warrior Christ like Sawyer's.

But then the national identity in America is commonly linked to Christian faith, driven by the mythology of American exceptionalism, in which, in the words of the social scientist Michael Novak, 'citizens regard the American way of life as though it were somehow chosen by God, uniquely important to the history of the human race'.<sup>53</sup> Sports have long contributed to this mythology through the cultivation of 'Muscular Christianity', a doctrine that depends on 'manliness, morality and patriotism'.<sup>54</sup> Sports and Christianity, therefore, are often discourses that mutually affirm the imagined community of America. The faith that is required to believe in and defend 'America', then, is ultimately what this image is about. The hypermasculine

50. Carl Stempel, 'Televised Sports, Masculinist Moral Capital, and Support for the U.S. Invasion of Iraq', *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 30 (2006), pp. 79-106.

51. David Scott Domke and Kevin M. Coe, *The God Strategy: How Religion Became a Political Weapon in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 38.

52. George W. Bush, *Whitehouse Archives* (<http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>), accessed 1 September 2011.

53. Michael Novak, 'The Natural Religion', in *Sport and Religion* (ed. S.J. Hoffman; Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics Books, 1992), pp. 35-42.

54. Tony Ladd and James A. Mathisen, *Muscular Christianity: Evangelical Protestants and the Development of American Sport* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), p. 14.



macho physique of a Jesus 'built like a brick shithouse', ready for combat, offers an image of a stronger nation rising from the ashes of attack and it is powerful within the political culture constituted by 9/11.

### *Conclusion*

Christ is a symbol of the place and power that elite, popular sports holds in contemporary society: messianic imagery in male-targeted sports-advertising functions to promote sports-stars who play/fight for their country as examples of muscular male heroism. The sports celebrity is merely the vehicle through which the metaphor of national identity is communicated. As I have argued, the motif further works to offer a double alibi for male-to-male looking, aiding in the disavowal of the male erotic gaze. This muscular masculinity in sporting images comes at the same time as muscular Christianity returns to popular culture in hugely commercially successful and influential artwork from artists such as Stephen Sawyer. Christ has been subject to a renewed rhetorical significance in times of heightened patriotism in post-9/11 America and during sporting competitions of national importance, and messianic sports imagery offers a narrative of redemption, thereby renewing the promise of a nation.