



Muscular Christianity in contemporary South Africa: The case of the Mighty Men Conference

Author:Siphiwe Dube¹**Affiliation:**¹Department of Practical Theology, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria, South Africa**Correspondence to:**

Siphiwe Dube

Email:

siphiwe.dube@up.ac.za

Postal address:

Room 1–46/1–47, Theology Building, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria, Hatfield Campus, Pretoria 0028, South Africa

Dates:

Received: 20 Mar. 2015

Accepted: 04 Apr. 2015

Published: 01 July 2015

How to cite this article:Dube, S., 2015, 'Muscular Christianity in contemporary South Africa: The Case of the Mighty Men Conference', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 71(3), Art. #2945, 9 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v71i3.2945>**Copyright:**

© 2015. The Authors.

Licensee: AOSIS

OpenJournals. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

Drawing on key aspects of Muscular Christianity identified through this movement's literature, this article ventures that the major contemporary Evangelical Christian men's movement in South Africa, the Mighty Men Conference (MMC), draws on and harkens back to the concerns of the Victorian era of Muscular Christianity. Moreover, the article argues that this reversion should be of concern in the context of a post-apartheid and postcolonial South Africa where both women's rights and human rights (especially encompassing racial equality) now form the core of the country's identity. In other words, the MMC's call to men to reclaim their top position is problematic even while it comes from a place of concern regarding the changing role of men in a transitional South African landscape.

Introduction

The Muscular Christian Movement constitutes a significant part of the history of the intersection of masculinit(y)ies and religion(s) in a global context. This statement holds true even while recognising that Muscular Christianity is not uniform in its global instantiations. As part of the broad response to the concern of Christianity being regarded as an 'effeminate' religion in the Victorian era (1837–1901), the Muscular Christianity movement produced literature and discourses whose purpose was to rethink the relationship between 'manhood or masculinity' and Christianity, where both identity markers were constructed in singular terms. Drawing on key aspects of Muscular Christianity identified through this movement's literature, this article ventures that the major contemporary Evangelical Christian men's movement in South Africa, the Mighty Men Conference (MMC), draws on and harkens back to the concerns of Victorian era Muscular Christianity. Moreover, the article argues that this reversion should be of concern in the context of a post-apartheid and postcolonial South Africa where both women's rights and human rights (especially encompassing racial equality) now form the core of the country's identity. In other words, the MMC's call to men to reclaim their top position is problematic even while it comes from a place of concern regarding the changing role of men in a transitional South African landscape.

Muscular Christianity

In describing Muscular Christianity, Björn Krondorfer and Philip Culbertson (2005) note that the Christian men's movements arose in the 19th and 20th centuries in 'the Western' world out of the panic that women were moving into the sphere of the sacred and were taking over religious institutions. The first such development in the first half of the 19th century was known as Muscular Christianity, which characterised Christian churches as feminised, numerically dominated by women, and therefore weak, sentimental, and irrational (Krondorfer & Culbertson 2005:5862). Moreover, this was a concern that affected both Catholic and Protestant Christians, but was most ardently taken up by Protestant churches in England, Canada, and the United States of America (USA).

Even though there are marked contextual differences within 'the Western world' countries in terms of how the ideology of Christian men reclaiming religion during this period worked, it is clear from the research on this movement, nonetheless, that each country exhibited aspects of the larger ideology of these movements and historical moments. In Canada, for example, Patricia Dirks' work has examined this discourse within Protestant denominations (between 1900 and 1920) and demonstrates how the revitalisation of the Sunday School Movement and the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) exemplify the persistence of an obsession with the crisis of encouraging men to attend church (Dirks 2002:290–316). In America, Clifford Putney argues in his book on manhood and sports in America between 1880 and 1920 that, 'Muscular Christians were active not only in America but also England, where the term "muscular Christianity" arose in the 1850s' to describe a specific form of Christian manliness (Putney 2001:1).

Specifically, as Putney (2003) argues when outlining the historical and theological roots of Muscular Christianity – worthy to be quoted at length:

Muscular Christianity can be defined as a Christian commitment to health and manliness. Its origins can be traced to the New Testament, which sanctions manly exertion (Mark 11:15) and physical health (1 Cor. 6:19–20). The early Church sometimes praised health and manliness, but it was much more concerned with achieving salvation, and it preached that men could achieve salvation without being healthy and husky. This doctrine seemingly squared with the Gospels, and it reigned supreme within the Church for centuries. It did inspire criticism, however, and that criticism was especially fierce in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when droves of Protestant ministers in England and America concluded that men were not truly Christians unless they were muscular Christians ... To make that church a suitable handmaiden for British imperialism, Hughes and Kingsley sought to equip it with rugged and manly qualities. They also exported their campaign for more health and manliness in religion to antebellum America, where their ideas failed to catch on immediately due to factors such as Protestant opposition to sports and the popularity of feminine iconography within the mainline Protestant churches. As evidence that there existed a ‘woman peril’ in American Protestant churches, critics such as the pioneer psychologist G. Stanley Hall pointed to the imbalance of women to men in the pews. They also contended that women’s influence in church had led to an overabundance of sentimental hymns, effeminate clergymen and sickly-sweet images of Jesus. These things were repellant to ‘real men’ and boys, averred critics, who argued that males would avoid church until ‘feminized’ Protestantism gave way to muscular Christianity, a strenuous religion for the strenuous life.

In other words, Muscular Christianity was adopted as a response to the perceived puritanical and ascetic religiosity of the time, and adherents of this movement argued that participation in rigorous activities could contribute to the development of not only physical fitness and manly character, but also Christian morality (Newsome 1961).

Moreover, in identifying a core aspect of Muscular Christianity in England, Sean Gill (2005), in answer to a question regarding the impact of critical perspectives on religion by studies on men and masculinities makes the following observation:

Early studies in this area were dominated by the paradigm of ‘muscular Christianity’, and concentrated on the means by which Christian theology and praxis both in the evangelical home, and in the usually Broad or High Church public school, helped to create and sustain a model of masculinity which placed a premium upon physical and sporting prowess as well as sexual and emotional continence. (pp. 207–208)

Although arguing in the context of the scholarship on Victorian England, Gill’s argument is echoed in the ‘new colonies’ of New England (USA) and Upper Canada (Canada). What can be gleaned then from Putney’s and Gill’s assessments above is that traditional Muscular Christianity prized ruggedness and physical prowess, highlighted

emotional and sexual self-restraint, and saw the role of men as that of leadership in the family and the church.

However, in his article examining the impact and legacy of Muscular Christianity in Canada through Quebec’s Catholic masculinit(y)ies in the period leading up to and during the Quiet Revolution in Quebec (1960s), Jean-Francois Roussel proffers another dimension of the Muscular Christian movement. Roussel (2003) notes:

Ministers regularly recommended men to be faithful to sacraments and prayers and to be responsible for their children’s immortal souls. Some recall the important role of the father in the family prayer and spirituality. (p. 150)

Furthermore, this trend of exhorting men this way affected both Catholic and Protestant Christians in Canada, as Patricia Dirks (2002) observes with regards to Protestant denominations between 1900 and 1920 as noted already. What is of particular interest from the preceding observations is how similar discourses of masculinities also exist in the MMC – namely, the significance of the family in defining masculinit(y)ies through recommendations for men to be active, responsible fathers and husbands on the one hand, and a concern with traditional notions of hegemonic masculinity on the other hand.

Significantly, while notions of nurture and hospitality have been traditionally understood as ‘feminine’ virtues, their appearance in some of the Muscular Christianity discourse is illuminating for signifying a different understanding of this discourse in a global context. In other words, this particular form of Muscular Christianity balanced the traditionalist and individualist manly virtues of physical strength and endurance demonstrated by prowess in sports, for example, with a spirituality informed by ‘elements such as the family, work, and the land as a source of nurture and giver of God’s gifts’ (Roussel 2003:149). As Roussel (2003:149) notes further, the individualist manly virtues that are glorified and pursued by the traditional Muscular Christianity – an association between physical strength and endurance demonstrated by prowess in sports for example – remained almost absent from the Catholic discourse of Canada. The emphasis on this other side of masculinity is evident in how, as Roussel (2003) observes with regards to Quebec:

[W]hatever movement one looks at, there is an overriding conviction: the kind of man that you are is defined by the way that you assume your responsibilities in the context of your social location: as spouse, father, Christian, citizen, worker, or, one may add, clergyman. (p.149)

In similar fashion, MMC stresses in its message that men have to convey the fragrance of Jesus Christ in everything that they do:

Whether it be the sport field, the factory, the farm, the college, the university, they need to lead from the front, by example. Men need to be encouraged to be men, to be good fathers, good husbands, good leaders and good citizens for the benefit of the Kingdom of God. (Buchan 2014)

Such a perspective stands in sharp contrast to MMC's other adherence to traditional Muscular Christian traits. Where, men are:

[S]tarting to take their rightful roles at home as prophet, priest and king ... Men who are prepared to be chivalrous and knights in shining armor for the women in their lives. (Buchan 2012:95)

This multidimensionality of the MMC raises questions about how to evaluate this movement's seemingly contradictory notions of masculinities.

Given this very short synopsis of the Muscular Christianity movement, a question arises then regarding what the connection is between the Victorian era men's movement and the contemporary Mighty Men Conference in South Africa? Especially, since there is no indication within the Christian historical records and academic analyses in South Africa that Muscular Christianity has played a direct role in this country's Christian experience other than cursorily through the introduction of rugby in schools and the prevalence of the English Boarding School System (Nauright 1996:121–139). What basis is there for drawing a comparison between Muscular Christianity and MMC? Moreover, even if there are comparable issues identified, what value does such comparison have in the contemporary context?

The core of muscular Christianity and MMC's Message

Firstly, in similar fashion to the Victorian era context where men were seen as abdicating their responsibility, Angus Buchan views the MMC as a response to a similar situation not only in South Africa but globally. In particular, Sarojini Nadar (2009:553–554) observes this perception of men's abdication when quoting Buchan's interview for the television show *Carteblanche*, where Buchan is noted as saying:

Man's masculinity in the world today, in this 21st Century, is being eroded and broken down. And young men – some young men – don't know what a man is supposed to be! There are no role models, no mentors to look up to. What is a man supposed to do? How is he supposed to act? ... And so what we did was – I believe, not we, but the Lord – restored masculinity. They are men! You have got to stand up and be counted! You have got to represent your family, your business, your company. Stop walking around like a, you know, a whipped dog with his tail between his legs. That's no use to anybody ... It's getting back to basics ... And so that's why we had the men's conference, ok? We take the shambok [*whip*] out and we give the guys a big hiding. And they can let their hair down, and they can cry, and they can repent, and they can go back. (Nadar 2009:553–554)

Buchan's description above makes it clear, without directly saying so, that there was once a time when masculinity was not eroded and men knew how to be men. Moreover, in directly engaging the argument of traditional Muscular Christianity discourse around the lack of men in churches, Buchan (2012) argues that:

There is a perception in the church that the only people who attend the house of God are women, children, old people

and wimps (men who hide behind the Cross). That is totally unfounded. The church fathers died for their faith by the drove. It's coming back again. (pp. 139–140)

Men are, according to Buchan, taking responsibility and this is what young men are looking for in older men in the church.

In South Africa, as several scholars studying masculinity have observed:

[A]t the very moment the Constitution appears to a variety of men to imply, through its provisions on gender, that heterosexual men have been and are in privileged positions of power, many men who identify as heterosexual experience their current reality as one in which their power is being increasingly diminished. (Jolly 2010:117)

The MMC, then, is a restoration of a particular form of masculinity in South Africa: One premised on men being the heads of their families, where family is defined in conservative hetero-normative terms of husband and wife with children. In fact, according to Buchan (2012):

God raised each man up and gave him the genes to be the head of his house, not over his house, but of his house ... Men were created by God to watch over their wives and children. They were given the broad shoulders to carry the load and lead. (p. 180)

In other words, men need to regain 'exclusive ownership over the social roles once held as bastions for establishing and performing patriarchal' hegemonic masculinity (Atkinson 2011:5). To that end, the rise of Evangelical Christian men's movements such as the MMC in South Africa is a response to the perceived loss of traditional masculinity that has a long history going back to Victorian era Muscular Christianity.

Secondly, as noted already, traditional Muscular Christianity emphasised strength and might as key aspects of Christian manliness, exhibited as it were through sport and the adoption of a rugged lifestyle. Nadar (2009:555) notes in affirmation of this observation with respect to MMC that:

What is also evident in Buchan's rhetoric is a language of conquest and might and strength. Nowhere is this more clear of course, than in the choice to name these meetings the 'Mighty Men's Conference. (p. 555)

That is to say, as a response to the perceived male 'feminisation' currently taking place, Buchan appeals to a rugged representation of himself as a role model for other MMC men as a mighty man. As Kobus du Pisani (2014:14 of 31) observes:

In the promotion material of the Mighty Men campaigns the predominant image that Buchan creates of himself is the farmer, the hardworking man connected to the soil. He is often photographed against the backdrop of agrarian scenes (see the photos in Buchan 2012:115, 116, 224, 225). (p. 14)

Moreover, as Buchan (2012) says with regards to 'the measure of a man':

A man wants to be measured against someone who can play rough, if need be, who can climb mountains, swim rivers, box,

wrestle, ride wild horses, tame wild animals, go on expeditions and test himself. (p. 136)

This man stands in contrast to a woman, who is 'normally gentle, delicate and is made differently to a man' as Buchan (2012:136) notes immediately prior to the description of 'the measure of a man' cited above. By presenting himself in a rugged, agrarian environment and emphasising the rigour of physical well-being, Buchan and his mighty men become muscular Christians par excellence – men that work the land and through that act affirm their spiritual and mental manliness against the supposed prevalent discourse of 'effeminate masculinity'.

Thirdly, as further evidence of the way in which MMC appeals to the discourse of Muscular Christianity as described above, albeit focusing on Rousell's observations, a further analysis of Buchan's MMC's 'simple message' reveals similar concerns between Victorian era Muscular Christianity and the MMC. There is a notable prevalence of the family as foundational message in the movement's understanding of what it means to be a man. For example, three of the nine points of the message speak specifically to men and their responsibility to the family:

Apart from being the man of the home, men also need to be Godly examples in the workplace. Whether it be the sport field, the factory, the farm, the college, the university, they need to lead from the front, by example; Men need to understand that they have a responsibility, not only to the family, but to the community and then to their nation; Men need to be encouraged to be men, to be good fathers, good husbands, good leaders and good citizens for the benefit of the Kingdom of God. (Mighty Men 2014b)

As is evident in the last point in particular, MMC emphasises the roles of husbands and fathers as essential to the project of restoring the masculine moral compass.

In further highlighting MMC's focus on the family Buchan has been quoted by Nadar (2009:556), drawing from Buchan's interview on *Carteblanche*, as saying, '[i]t's not a case of saying the man is superior to the woman – never! On the contrary. But there is an order that is established in the Bible.' Certainly, that order puts the man first, woman next, and children last. Where, without this order, assumedly, there cannot exist proper moral order either. Moreover, as Nadar notes further (2009:556), in the same interview, Jill Buchan, Angus Buchan's wife, reiterates the same perspective when she says:

The church of God needs men. They need fathers, they need everything set back in order because it's not in order, because the church is full of homes that are still struggling with headship and God says he's going to sort out the church first. (Nadar 2009:556)

Elsewhere, Buchan (2012) notes in reference to the family that:

I keep stressing to the ladies that this Mighty Men concept was initiated and born through a heart that we have for the family so that men can be prophet, priest and king that they are meant to be in their own homes. (p. 165)

In other words, although ministering to men, the MMC is actually designed for the good of women as Buchan concludes from the preceding statement. What is clear from Buchan's statements is that he sees the role of MMC as reviving and championing values that conserve the traditional family in similar ways to the Muscular Christianity's concern with reviving the family as the hub of masculine restoration through the notion of familial responsibility.

Fourthly, the same rhetoric of balance between the pursuit of individual manly virtues and social focus on the family is observable in the way in which on the one hand, the message of the MMC is very clear that unless Christian men maximise their physical, mental, and social strengths, their spiritual development will be stunted. As such, men should not view this journey as easy, but should recognise that it is only for 'mighty men'. On the other hand, the MMC emphasises the importance of men pursuing good relationships as fathers and husbands, with particular reference to expressing emotion (Buchan 2012:24–27, 84–87, 94–95, 114, 142–147, 170, 180–183). In other words, the MMC's general discourse on Christian masculinity can be said to hinge upon the dual recognition of both the pursuit of individual ambition and/or salvation and the fulfilment of family duties. That said, the pursuit of individual ambition and the performance of the family duties only occurs in the context of hyper-heteronormativity – where only men and women can enter into a legally and morally recognised union. Hence, it can be concluded that the MMC promotes the type of Muscular Christianity that appeals to both the traditional form of late Victorian hyper-masculine discourse of Thomas Hughes' and Charles Kingley's *Tom Brown* and a discourse of manliness most strongly akin to Rousell's (2003) figure of the 'Habitant'.

As demonstrated so far, the discourse of masculinity promoted by the MMC, in similar fashion to some types of Victorian era Muscular Christianity, reveals a dual concern with both the interconnectedness between men as an individual group as well as men with familial responsibilities and social networks that emphasise relationality rather than just autonomous experiences. Understood this way, the mission of the MMC, which is:

[T]o teach men to be: Prophet – the man who leads his family. Priest – the man who heads up his home spiritually. King – the man who is the primary bread winner of his home (Mighty Men 2014b),

(all individually driven aims), is balanced out by the message that: 'Men need to understand that they have a responsibility, not only to the family, but to the community and then to their nation' (Mighty Men 2014b). Moreover, this latter discourse has tended to also support the display of affective qualities usually deemed as 'effeminate' in traditional Muscular Christianity discourses. This brings us to the fifth feature of the ways in which the contemporary MMC in South Africa reflects similar concerns with Victorian era Muscular Christianity.

In the context of Muscular Christianity in Canada, Nancy Christie (2002) notes for example that:

[F]athers were instructed to develop their 'feminine' qualities and to express their emotions in an affectionate manner to their spouses and children, while sons were enjoined to recognize early that 'life is a struggle of individuals', so they could competently earn a good wage and secure an independent existence for themselves and their families. (p. 17)

That is, in response to traditional Muscular Christianity's construction of the Christian religion at the time as 'effeminate', hence deterring men from the church pews, there was a simultaneous emphasis on the expression of affective qualities as a demanding exercise fit only to be engaged by the most strong-willed Christian men. In this sense, this particular inflection of Muscular Christianity challenged the simplistic equation of displaying affective qualities with weakness.

In reading Buchan's book, *The Mighty Men journey* (2012), one is constantly confronted by an emphasis on the manliness of Christian men as inclusive of the ability to display affective qualities and this is strongly purported, given importance in the context of the MMC, and acknowledged as a necessary part of the process of men self-evaluating (Buchan 2012:24–27, 84–87, 94–95, 114, 142–147, 170, 180–183). After all, Buchan does note that crying is a necessary part of the transformative work on masculine identity. He says (quoted in Nadar 2009):

And so that's why we had the men's conference, ok? We take the shambok out and we give the guys a big hiding. And they can let their hair down, and they can cry, and they can repent, and they can go back. (p. 557)

Elsewhere, Buchan (2012:111–112) affirms the same need for affection, but that has delimitations of ruggedness nonetheless:

Men need a place (*space*) where they can just be men, where they can laugh, cry, seek counsel ... They need to identify with each other, to take the mask off and be themselves. (p. 111)

Moreover, as Buchan (2012:21) further notes, 'During the first Mighty Men Conference, we did more crying than speaking.' Owino (2012:80) further affirms this 'emotionalism' as a common occurrence when describing his observations at MMC events.

Progressive limitations

In contrast to the emphasis on ruggedness and toughness highlighted in Buchan's other messages, here he and other MMC men privilege a distinctly non-traditional understanding of ideal Christian masculinity observable elsewhere as 'soft'. Albeit that the display of affection in this context is still identified as 'feminine' according to a distinctly patriarchal order of coding gender qualities. This is because, for Buchan, men do not just stop at crying, but they get back on the proverbial horse by demonstrating toughness, stoicism, and resilience in the face of adversity (Owino 2012:81). Rather than just demonstrating conflicting

masculinities as Owino argues in the same description above, the MMC's 'male emotionalism' (Owino's term) turns out to be a common feature of Christian men's movements that can be traced all the way back to certain Victorian era Muscular Christianity discourses.

Nonetheless, Owino is correct to point to the conflictual nature of MMC's discourse on re-imagining masculinity as this highlights both the problematic (as in points one to three above) and the positive (as in points four and five above) notions of Muscular Christianity as represented by the MMC. Moreover, as some feminist critics have observed with regard to similar Evangelical Christian men's movements such as the Promise Keepers:

[The] ambiguities and contradictions of men's efforts to reconstruct ideals of fathering and fatherhood, nonetheless, should help challenge overly hasty conclusions to the effect that invocations of fatherhood and family values are merely well-rehearsed modes for enforcing patriarchy. (Newton 2005:178)

That is to say, while notions of fatherhood and marriage promoted by the MMC seem great and progressive, the extent to which they are progressive has to be weighed against how they negatively affect (how much purchase they have in) the public sphere.

That is to say, on the one hand, one can certainly sympathise with the attempts of the MMC to challenge men to be better fathers and husbands and to be more responsible in their roles. On the other hand, however, some critics argue that MMC's use of controversial biblical scriptures, for example,¹ in exhorting men regarding their role as fathers and husbands is merely another antic for re-establishing male power over women. According to the critics, while Promise Keepers in both Canada and the United States might indeed offer a nuanced interpretation of such controversial scriptures, and thereby challenge men to become better husbands and fathers, there remains, nonetheless, a disquieting aspect to their rhetoric. As Nadar (2009) argues:

The 'universal' message of the bible [*sic*] as word of God for all ages will be a common denominator for men across the racial spectrum, and even if they do not buy into the ethnic implications of this new hegemonic masculinity ... through relational and discursive uses of masculine power the MMC will succeed in restoring not just masculinities, but hegemonic masculinities, in its varied forms. (p. 558)

In other words, as progressive as the focus on the family approach and affective openness are in the context of both Muscular Christianity and the MMC by opening up the proscriptive and prescriptive understandings of

1. One such biblical verse that is regarded as problematic by critics is Ephesians 5:22–28 which states: 'Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind – yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.'



masculinities, they, nonetheless, privilege hetero-patriarchal and hetero-normative gender standards.

In the descriptions of men's roles in the rhetoric of both Muscular Christianity and MMC, the men are centrally identified by their roles as husbands (marital relations) and fathers (reproductive relations). Furthermore, sex and gender are seen as the same thing and fundamentally only heterosexual and hetero-normative. So, to be a real man one has to be masculine through 'proper' gendered behaviours, activities, and relations with women. This noted reference to the underlying hetero-normative nature of both the Victorian era movement and the contemporary MMC further reveals how both these movements, as progressive as they are in some respects, by offering the possibility of intervening with a different intentionality in the debate on gender identity formation and transformation, are bound nonetheless by a specific form of homogenous identity. This, however, is not a new argument as Nadar arrives at a similar criticism in her analysis of the MMC. Where she argues that, Buchan 'establishes hetero-normative principles for marriage, and then asserts that restoring these norms is God's initiative – not his' (Nadar 2009:557). This criticism is, however, a common feature of criticisms laid out against similar men's movements such as the Promise Keepers, the Religions Forward Movement, and the Mythopoetic Movement just to name a few.

Vestiges of Empire

A further pertinent critique with regard to the MMC and Muscular Christianity has to do with the relationship between the evocation of Muscular Christianity in the context of Empire and, in particular, the MMC context of the perception of decline of white male power in post-apartheid South Africa and the need to reaffirm this power in a public way. That is to say, while it is arguable that the MMC is laudable on the front of promoting the ideas of responsible fathers and attentive husbands as part of challenging the normative discourse of separate spheres (public and private), the erosion of hard-won rights for women (as well as other minority groups) that come with the movement's public discourse of men reaffirming a particular kind of masculinity undermines its other 'good' work. Moreover, given the contemporary liberal socio-political climate of South Africa post-1994 with regard to challenging the white political hegemony of the period prior, and the emphasis since then on notions of gender and racial equality amongst others, one certainly should be wary of a movement that wants to harken back to this lost time under the veil of a godly masculinity.

In an unpublished paper, Alexandra Howard (2014) notes that:

[T]he creation of a cult of masculinity in Britain was a deliberate design to ensure cultural ascendancy for the purposes of Empire. The rise of a power-invested sporting culture set the impetus for the fashioning of elite muscular Christians who would eventually be the guardians of Empire and champions of the imperial legacy.

Moreover, as Paul Deslandes (2005:6) has observed: '[B]old claims for the superiority of the British man as an aggressive, competitive, power figure' can be attributed to the sense of vulnerability that British men experienced abroad in the feelings of the decline of the superiority of the 'master race'. For this reason, as Howard (2014) notes in light of Deslandes:

As opposed to an evangelical Christian model based on altruism and benevolence, the new definition of manliness demanded a generation of imperial leaders who would be audacious physical specimens in possession of athletic prowess. Individuals who embodied that 'muscular Christianity' were regarded as future guardians of Empire whose superiority would provide the justification for continual colonial expansion.

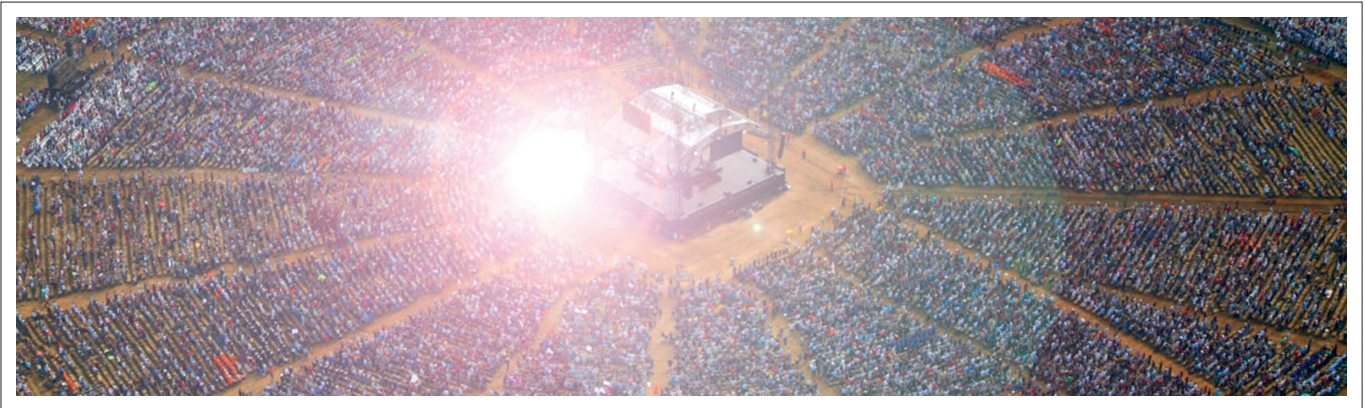
While not concerned with expansion, it can be argued that the MMC subscribes to a similar idea of the decline of white, specifically Afrikaner, ascendancy.

Both Nadar and Owino bring attention to the observation that, while calling attention to 'the shifts in gender relations that have taken place in the political and economic contexts of South Africa's new democracy post-1994,' the rise of the MMC also calls attention to 'its demographic attraction, where over 80% of the men attending its gatherings are predominantly White English- and Afrikaans- speaking South Africans' (Owino 2012:72). Nadar (2009) affirms this observation by noting that:

It is not insignificant that almost all of the 60,000 men who attended the conference were White and most of them were farmers like Buchan. In the light of the current land crisis in our neighbouring Zimbabwe, and in the light of the bitter debates around land claims in SA, it does not take a leap of the imagination to figure out why Buchan's message is so attractive to White farmers who throng to his meetings. There is another kind of crisis in masculinity going on for White men, particularly Afrikaner men in post-apartheid South Africa. Given that almost 80% of the men who attended the MMC in 2008 were White Afrikaners, one has to ask what their motivations for attending are. What are they longing for? The crisis for White Afrikaner men is that the nature of White Afrikaner hegemonic masculinity is being challenged by the democratic order ushered in 1994; by an increase in acceptance of diverse sexual orientations; and not least of all by a steady rise in women's emancipation. (p. 557)

Thereby highlighting what du Pisani has noted elsewhere with regard to the decline of Afrikaner hegemonic masculinity.

Du Pisani (2001:163) has argued that, 'the number of Afrikaner men in positions of public power is declining and men are not as dominant in the domestic sphere as before.' Moreover, 'Afrikaner masculinity no longer prescribes ideals of masculinity to South African society at large, to white men in general, or even to Afrikaans-speaking white men' (du Pisani 2001:163–164). As such, du Pisani is not certain that we can continue then to speak of a hegemonic masculinity as such in a post-apartheid era. However, this latter observation is beside the point of the current analysis, which is to point to the ways in which the construction of masculinity in certain forms of Muscular Christianity coincides with that



Source: 'Miraculous Mighty Men 2009!', 2009, *The Greytown Gazette*, viewed 25 March 2014, from <http://www.greytown.co.za/gazettefolder/gazette-april-09.html>

FIGURE 1: Picture of Mighty Men Conference taken from above.



Source: The Mighty Men Conference, 2014b, *Mighty Men Conference Banner 5*, viewed 25 March 2014, from <http://www.mightymenconference.co.za>

FIGURE 2: Mighty Men Conference banner.

of the MMC, and that this should raise some concerns not only in relation to gender relations but also race relations in a post-apartheid and postcolonial South Africa. Owino (2012) certainly agrees when he asks:

Could it be that White Afrikaner men interpret their loss of racial control and political dominance as their failure to keep the 'divine task and responsibility' apportioned to them as chosen men of God? (p. 76)

This question is important in that it highlights directly how the notion of 'Afrikaner Chosenness' intersects with the preceding 'British Chosenness' in the history of South African imperialism. Where, both nations imagined themselves the elect of God's chosen to lead and build the South African nation. Seen this way, further credence is given to the argument that the similarities in the discourses of Muscular Christianity and the MMC are not only visible at the level of individual religiosity about men, but those of the social construction of gender and race relations as well.

The MMC's response to the fall of Empire, so to speak, is to keep the dream of the theocratic nation alive by calling the men back into the ring of the school of hard knocks. In similar fashion to the Deslandes's and Howard's observations above that rather than drawing on the Christian model of altruism and benevolence, the MMC's definition of the new man

relies more on the imperial language of might and conquest, where the individual men who stick it out will be regarded as the guardians of God's dominion and whose valour will be fodder for the justification of the racial superiority discourse. In fact, when Buchan (2012:18) notes that the term 'Mighty Men' refers to 'King David's mighty men, men who were prepared to die for the cause, for each other and for King David,' he makes a very direct link between imperial domination with reference to a particular group of people.

The above is especially interesting to consider in light of the fact that MMC meetings post-2010 have been scheduled to be held all over South Africa, as Shalom Ministries' spokeswoman, Bianca Ortmann confirmed on the Karoo MMC event website in 2010 (Mighty Men 2014a). That is, this shift from a singular location to multiple locations mimics very clearly the trajectory of imperial strategy employed by the British Empire of ruling from the metropole, with the flow of information and knowledge going one way. The first image (Figure 1), taken from the MMC's website provides a compelling representation of this idea given the central stage around which is organised, in army-like formation, the followers who are expected to then take the message of salvation (note the shining light) elsewhere across the country. Moreover, the image of the banner, also taken from the MMC website (Figure 2), along with the verse



highlighted in it (2 Sm 22:30–40), uses the language of battle and conquest, albeit couched in faith discourse.²

While of course it is arguable that the MMC appeals to the language of battle and conquest at the metaphorical level for the purposes of inspiring individual transformation, Nadar's (2009) observations above that the land crisis issue looms large in the minds of many white Afrikaners in light of Zimbabwe and the current land claims in South Africa should put such metaphorical reference to task. That is, the longing for a return to a dominant masculinities model of gender relations is not simply about restoring men to leadership roles, but also restoring the racial ascendancy of white men on the top of the power matrix. That there are men of colour present at this meeting is great, but the Empire metropole has been known to use 'local' leaders in the execution of its mandate. In other words, the reconciliatory tone of MMC meetings is questionable given the overwhelming attractiveness of this movement to white South African men in particular. This observation is especially apt to consider in light of the difference in approach to Christian masculinities put forth by other organisations such as IMBADU Men's Project (Centre for Christian Spirituality 2014).

IMBADU is a Cape Town-based Christian men's group that describes itself as follows:

We see ourselves as men ... addressing issues around men and masculinity (or masculinities) – not in an exclusive or dominatory way, but with the aim of growing more and more into men who are compassionate, being able to relate, connect with other men, women, children, nature and God in a deep, meaningful, nonviolent and life-giving way.

That is to say, unlike the MMC, which emphasises the language of might and conquest as argued above, IMBADU is especially keen on promoting a culture of self-reflexivity, compassion, and positive relationality. This focus, which does not connect well with the masculinity promoted by the MMC, raises questions with regard to how such an approach has less appeal to white South African men as opposed to the MMC approach. From the perspective of this article, the appeal of the MMC is that it plays well into the 'otherness' discourse of empire that centres on white men's ascendancy and their sense of loss of that feeling of greatness that has accompanied constitutional democratic change in post-apartheid South Africa.

In other words, although also focused on men as part of the response to the 'crisis in or of masculinity', IMBADU does not appeal to a conservative hegemonic masculinity, but recognises the diversity of experiences that constitute

2.30. With your help I can advance against a troop; with my God I can scale a wall. 31. As for God, his way is perfect; the word of the LORD is flawless. He is a shield for all who take refuge in him. 32. For who is God besides the LORD? And who is the Rock except our God? 33. It is God who arms me with strength and makes my way perfect. 34. He makes my feet like the feet of a deer; he enables me to stand on the heights. 35. He trains my hands for battle; my arms can bend a bow of bronze. 36. You give me your shield of victory; you stoop down to make me great. 37. You broaden the path beneath me, so that my ankles do not turn. 38. I pursued my enemies and crushed them; I did not turn back till they were destroyed. 39. I crushed them completely, and they could not rise; they fell beneath my feet. 40. You armed me with strength for battle; you made my adversaries bow at my feet.

understandings of masculinities in post-apartheid South Africa. In support of this perspective, IMBADU (2014) notes on its website that:

[T]his is a project for men. We are concerned for men. We believe that in the current South African situation many men are insecure about themselves and relationships with other men and women and children. There is a very high degree of violence, mostly committed by men. But while we are concerned for men, this concern is not exclusive one but inclusive, including a concern for women and children, and embracing a diversity of masculinities.

While acknowledging the important role that men have to play in contemporary South Africa, IMBADU does not construct the significance of this role in conservative gender terms or sees it as only a men's issue that requires a hands-off approach from women as the MMC does in its hierarchical construction of reclaiming masculinity. Buchan (2012:111; 165; 180–183) states that men need space to be men and that this is actually beneficial to women as they end up with men who take up their leadership position by being in charge (mostly through disciplining children), putting food on the table, and protecting their wives and children.

Moreover, the relationality approach taken by IMBADU, which stresses diversity in the context of a racialised South Africa, challenges the notion of masculinity that appeals to a limited group of white men in particular. By stressing a compassionate self in relation to others, including God, the type of masculinity put forth is one of connectivity and common ground, rather than divisive difference. As noted already, the logic of negative difference, premised on racial ascendancy, is particular to the Muscular Christianity of the British Empire and, by extension in terms of this article's comparative argument, to the MMC. In calling for compassion then, IMBADU challenges the understanding of masculinity in terms of traditional Muscular Christianity, which prizes ruggedness and physical prowess, highlighting emotional restraint, and seeing the role of men as limited to leadership in the family and the church.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while short, this preceding comparison is meant to show how a different kind of Christian men's discourse on masculinity in post-apartheid South Africa is possible, thereby raising critique regarding the prevalence of the conservative ideology of masculinity promoted by the Mighty Men Conference. Moreover, by showing a link between the Muscular Christian discourse of the Victorian era and the contemporary discourse of the Mighty Men Conference, especially its appeal to white men in both contexts, the article draws attention to the continuity of the discourse of white male ascendancy couched in terms of faith talk. Thereby pointing to the ways in which gender functions as an intersectional identity marker that has bearings on other elements of identity such as race, class, sexuality, and ability amongst others. The point not being to isolate the MMC but to show how this movement has far greater reach in both South



Africa and the world and, as such, needs to be scrutinised as part of the vanguard against the resurgence of a particularly problematic global conservative Right movement.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge the University of Pretoria for the funding of the research leading to the publication of this article.

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

References

- Atkinson, M., 2011, *Deconstructing men and masculinities*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY.
- Buchan, A., 2012, *The Mighty Men journey*, Christian Art Publishers, Vereeniging.
- Buchan, A., 2014, *Mighty Men Conference*, viewed 25 March 2014, from <http://www.mightymenconference.co.za/>
- Centre for Christian Spirituality: Silence and Solidarity, 2014, *IMBADU Men's Project*, viewed 10 April 2014, from <http://christianspirit.co.za/imbadu-mens-project/>
- Christie, N., 2002, *Households of faith: Family, gender, and community in Canada, 1760–1969*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal/Kingston.
- Deslandes, P., 2005, *Oxbridge men: British masculinity and the undergraduate experience, 1850–1920*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN.
- Dirks, P., 2002, 'Reinventing Christian masculinity and fatherhood: The Canadian Protestant experience, 1900–1920' in N. Christie (ed.), *Households of faith: Family, gender, and community in Canada, 1760–1969*, pp. 290–316, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal.
- Du Pisani, K., 2001, 'Puritanism transformed: Afrikaner masculinities in the apartheid and post-apartheid period', in R. Morrell (ed.), *Changing men in Southern Africa*, pp. 157–176, University of Natal Press, Zed Books, Pietermaritzburg, New York, NY.
- Du Pisani, K., 2014, 'Palatable patriarchy? Angus Buchan, the "Mighty Men" and masculinity', paper presented at the European Social Science History Conference, Vienna, Austria, 23rd–26th April, pp. 1–31, viewed 23 October 2014, from <https://conference.socialhistoryservices.org/esshc/2014/userApi/downloadPaper/579>
- Gill, S., 2005, 'Why difference matters: Lesbian and gay perspectives on religion and gender', in U. King & T. Beattie (eds.), *Gender, religion and diversity: Cross-cultural perspectives*, pp. 201–211, Continuum, London/New York, NY.
- Howard, A., 2014, 'For the good of empire: Masculine sporting culture and Britain's imperial enterprise', viewed 19 November 2014, from <https://mcmaster.academia.edu/AlexandraHoward>
- Jolly, R., 2010, *Cultured violence: Narrative, social suffering, and engendering human rights in contemporary South Africa*, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, Scottsville.
- Krondorfer, B. & Culbertson, P., 2005, 'Men's studies in religion', in L. Jones (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd edn., Macmillan Reference, Detroit, vol. 9, pp. 5861–5866.
- Mighty Men Conference, 2014a, *Karoo MMC*, viewed 25 March 2014, from <http://www.karoommc.co.za/about/the-mighty-men-conferences>
- The Mighty Men Conference, 2014b, *Mighty Men Conference Banner 5*, viewed 25 March 2014, from <http://www.mightymenconference.co.za>
- 'Miraculous Mighty Men 2009!', 2009, *The Greytown Gazette*, viewed 25 March 2014, from <http://www.greytown.co.za/gazettefolder/gazette-april-09.html>
- Nadar, S., 2009, 'Palatable patriarchy and violence against wo/men in South Africa: Angus Buchan's Mighty Men's Conference as a case study of masculinism', *Scriptura* 102, 551–561. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7833/102-0-614>
- Nauright, J., 1996, 'Colonial manhood and imperial race virility: British responses to post-Boer War colonial rugby tours', in J. Nauright & T.J.L. Chandler (eds.), *Making men: Rugby and masculine identity*, pp. 121–139, Frank Cass, London.
- Newsome, D., 1961, *Godliness and good learning: Four studies on a Victorian ideal*, Cassell, London.
- Newton, J., 2005, *From panthers to Promise Keepers: Rethinking the men's movement, 1880–1920*, Rowman & Littlefield, Oxford/New York, NY.
- Owino, K., 2012, 'The Mighty Men Conference as a "safe space" for "born again" men to express conflicting masculinities?', *Journal of Gender and Religion in Africa* 18(2), 65–84.
- Putney, C., 2001, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and sports in Protestant America, 1880–1920*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Putney, C., 2003, 'Muscular Christianity', in *Infed.org*, viewed 23 April 2014, from www.infed.org/christianeducation/muscular_christianity.htm
- Roussel J-F., 2003, 'Roman Catholic religious discourse about manhood in Quebec: From 1900 to the Quiet Revolution (1960-1980)', *The Journal of Men's Studies* 11(2), 145–155. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3149/jms.1102.145>