

Redemptive Christian Masculinity: Faith-Based Civil Society Challenges to Intractable Ideologies in U.S. Evangelicalism

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1. Introduction

The construction of Christian masculinities through social and cultural gender projects has taken place since the birth of Christianity in Ancient Rome.¹ Historical and sociological study on the construction of gender identity and performance show that intentional efforts to define masculinity often attempt to reshape popular gender norms in light of specific social shifts, such as the convergence of civilizations and diverse ethnic groups.² Historical anthropology details the sociopolitical impacts of such gender projects unto the blending of religious and national identities in modern Western statecraft and beyond, exemplified in nationalistic religious moralities and gendered patriotic ideals in Western Christian traditions.³ Whether undertaken by states, ethnic groups, or religious communities, these gender projects negotiate, challenge, or strengthen particular gender ideologies that exist in societies through cultural, political and religious discourses. Though recent cultural discourses often appeal to the rhetoric of ‘a crisis of masculinity,’ dedicated scholarship reveals that with the timeless trial to define what it means to be a man, “masculinity is ‘always already in crisis.’”⁴

¹ Adriaan van Klinken and Peter-Ben Smit, “Jesus Traditions and Masculinities in World Christianity,” *Exchange* 42, no. 1 (2013): 1–15; Eric C. Stewart, “Masculinity in the New Testament and Early Christianity,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin: Journal of Bible and Culture* 46, no. 2 (May 2016): 91–102.

² Stewart, “Masculinity in the New Testament and Early Christianity,” 93.

³ Jasper Heinzen, ed., “State-Building in Gendered Perspective,” in *Making Prussians, Raising Germans: A Cultural History of Prussian State-Building after Civil War, 1866–1935*, New Studies in European History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 216–54.

⁴ Lieuw and Solomon-Goudeau, in Stewart, “Masculinity in the New Testament and Early Christianity,” 93.

Building upon decades of historical and anthropological study on Christian gender projects, this qualitative study compares global religious masculinity discourses and masculinity “transformation” projects to new and original initiatives being facilitated in the United States by faith-based ventures utilizing novel platforms and modalities to convene North American Christian men around the topic of “redemptive” religious masculinity performance in U.S. culture and society. Contextualized within recent interpretations of U.S. Christianity and politics, the discourses created by these new faith-based actors demonstrate intentional challenges to historic attitudes and ideologies in U.S. Christianity on cultural engagement and pluralism that have exacerbated sociopolitical tensions in the civil sphere. U.S. evangelicalism has particularly symbolized social order in terms of a “militant masculinity” ideology that has idealized social exclusion and combativity in its ‘glocal’ religious ideals, co-constituted by these ideological and political conditions.⁵

The case provided of the faith-based venture *Myth Quest* in its pilot run demonstrates the capabilities of religious masculinity transformation projects to counter authoritative and exclusionary social attitudes in terms of local and national social change intentionally directed towards positive, other-oriented action and ethics. This analysis will proceed to interrogate *Myth Quest*’s “redemptive” Christian masculinity (Chapter 7) for measurable social change in gender relations (Chapter 8) and large-scale movements for social repair (Chapter 9), first reviewing the extensive literature on global Christian masculinity construction projects and the intractable ideological approaches that have come to define their religious communities (Chapters 2, 3 & 4).

2. Men, Masculinities and Global Christianity

Close examinations of global Christianity reveal cultural projects to reconstruct masculine identity and performance at high and low levels of society, sometimes through the use of an ideology of gender traditionalism to creatively maintain advantageous, unequal power dynamics. The oft-noted product of this style of gender project is a superordinate masculinity performance labeled as ‘hegemonic masculinity,’ “a specific form of masculinity in a given historical and society-

⁵ Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (Liveright Publishing, 2020), 3.

wide social setting that legitimates unequal gender relations between men and women, between masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities.”⁶ Past scholarship has been able to comfortably utilize a social-constructivist conceptualization of gender to analyze these masculinity projects in order to discern their impact on gender relations and culture at-large. Anthropologists and sociologists have characterized this trend as a promising approach to the study of gender and religion that demands further application.⁷ The surplus of scholarship on masculinity construction in expressions of Western Christianity and Judaism has led to the creation of an academic field of men, masculinities and religion which regularly finds evangelical Christianity and its masculinity politics at the center of anthropological and sociological study.⁸

Global evangelicalism, a broad swath of global Protestant Christianity (sometimes including the globally-dominant and widely-diverse Pentecostal Christian tradition), cannot be narrowed down to a rigid orthodoxy or a closed network of believers. The cultural and discursive variety of evangelical communities implies that global expressions of evangelicalism should be seen as sharing a family resemblance of ‘glocalized’ practices and some amount of shared affiliations, ideology and theology.⁹ ‘Glocalization,’ in this context, captures “that globalisation — in the broadest sense, the compression of the world — has involved and increasingly involves the creation and the incorporation of locality” and vice versa, which in turn reframes global Pentecostalism and evangelicalism as general expressions of Protestant Christianity that both remain under constant ‘glocal’ transformation and significantly “bear traces of its own ‘national’ origins.”¹⁰ Discourse analysis thus best investigates this topic by identifying ‘evangelical’ actors according to a culturalist approach, identifying the contemporary evangelical network’s beliefs and practices “as they show themselves in discursive articulation and not in respect to historical

⁶ James W. Messerschmidt, “The Saliency of ‘Hegemonic Masculinity,’” *Men and Masculinities* 22, no. 1 (April 1, 2019): 86.

⁷ Allan Anderson et al., *Studying Global Pentecostalism: Theories and Methods*, The Anthropology of Christianity (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 81; Adriaan van Klinken, *Transforming Masculinities in African Christianity: Gender Controversies in Times of AIDS* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2013), 5; William H. Lockhart, “‘We Are One Life,’ but Not of One Gender Ideology: Unity, Ambiguity, and the Promise Keepers,” *Sociology of Religion* 61, no. 1 (2000): 75.

⁸ Klinken and Smit, “Jesus Traditions and Masculinities in World Christianity,” 3.

⁹ Anderson et al., *Studying Global Pentecostalism*, 26.

¹⁰ Roland Robertson, “Globalisation or Glocalisation?,” *Journal of International Communication* 18, no. 2 (2012): 205.

and theological ‘traditions,’ ‘roots,’ or ‘essences.’”¹¹ Here, emic distinctions among global Christians who communally identify as ‘evangelical’ and the etic categorizations crafted by researchers naturally find more harmony, whether used to compare or contrast contexts (i.e., distinguishing charismatic, oft-labeled Pentecostals with non-charismatic evangelical Christians in the United States;¹² or Brusco’s use of *evangélico* for “evangelical Protestantism” referencing Colombian Pentecostalism¹³). For this study, I will define ‘evangelicals’ as *‘individuals who identify closely with conservative Protestant Christianity and its (sub-)cultural, social and political worldview and activism, including religious belief in the authority of the Bible and the significance of Jesus Christ’s crucifixion in the salvation of the world and in the conversion experience of the individual.’*¹⁴ This conceptualization of *American evangelicals* in particular represents the encompassment of both historic Protestants and Pentecostals into the same religious and cultural Christian category.

Ethnographic studies on the construction of masculinities in global evangelicalism narrow-down a unique matrix of masculinity discourses, religious identities and resources for sociocultural influence in Christian communities’ low-level institutions: namely, the institutions of the Church, marriage, and the family. With universal spiritual significance in Christian communities, these institutions in *local* Christian society engender social change in work often absorbed by additional macro-level faith-based civil society actors (i.e., non-governmental organizations, not-for-profit organizations, religious universities, think tanks, etc.). However, case studies depict distinct visions for transformed masculinities and sociocultural change that are often dictated by the imagination and ideologies of their context which inform how Christians approach gender, culture and politics with local agency.

¹¹ Ibid, 55.

¹² Sally K. Gallagher and Christian Smith, “Symbolic Traditionalism and Pragmatic Egalitarianism: Contemporary Evangelicals, Families, and Gender,” *Gender and Society* 13, no. 2 (1999): 230.

¹³ Anderson et al., 75–76; Elizabeth E. Brusco, *The Reformation of Machismo: Evangelical Conversion and Gender in Colombia* (University of Texas Press, 2011), 5.

¹⁴ This definition of ‘evangelical’ takes into account the classic quadrilateral configuration of evangelical theology which continued to be used by the National Association of Evangelicals (U.S.); “What Is an Evangelical?,” *National Association of Evangelicals* (blog), accessed June 5, 2023, <https://www.nae.org/what-is-an-evangelical/>; Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 5.

In some cases, religious masculinity transformation brings about changes “of revolutionary proportions” at the local level.¹⁵ Brusco’s study of how evangelical conversion in Colombia challenges the violent male culture of *machismo* with a “domesticating” reconstruction of the male sex role, one that significantly reshapes the boundaries of private and public spheres of life for married women.¹⁶ Though social change influences local household structures and behaviors most (as Brusco describes according to global feminist discourse, “the intimate world of courtship patterns, marital roles, and who washes the dishes”), the Colombian evangelical ethic embodied by converted men and women innovatively outlines a major contextual shift in gender relations.¹⁷ Brusco observes that this produces an embodied evangelical identity that bases renewed gender relations in Colombia on an “aggressive focus on the family” and an implicit “patriarchal bargain” that subsequently stifle any broad religious engagement to culture-dominant gender ideologies and with adjacent cultural and political discourses.¹⁸

Klinken’s ethnography shows how the “transformation” of masculinities can integrate patriarchal authority in the Church, marriage and the family into a “biblical manhood” that can be identified in select Pentecostal Churches in Zambia and elsewhere in global evangelicalism at-large — both of which are considerably concerned with cultural gender politics.¹⁹ Ministries that address men and masculinities promoted a masculinity performance shaped by a Christian gender ideology of ‘male headship’ that teaches against defensive male domination and promotes virtues like responsibility, providing for one’s family, and self-control.²⁰ By means of individual conversion to the Pentecostal faith and the embodiment of biblical manhood, these Pentecostal Zambians “explicitly engaged in a transformation of masculinities as a response to the HIV epidemic and other social challenges” even while neglecting the structural and social-constructivist nature of gendered issues in post-epidemic Zambia — a neglect best observed in

¹⁵ Brusco, *The Reformation of Machismo*, 137.

¹⁶ Brusco, 5, 137; Anderson et al., *Studying Global Pentecostalism*, 89.

¹⁷ Brusco, 136, 139.

¹⁸ Anderson et al., *Studying Global Pentecostalism*, 76, 80, 88.

¹⁹ Klinken repeatedly refers to the regular use of teachings from American Evangelical discourses on gender and masculinity by the pastoral leadership of Northmead Assembly of God, a large Pentecostal church in Lusaka, Zambia; *Transforming Masculinities in African Christianity*, 118, 146.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 123–29.

the consistent “upholding patriarchal concepts but redefining them” in Pentecostal discourse.²¹ This Pentecostal neglect of structural influences contrasted to the religious discourses promoted by several proximal Protestant African theologians and Catholic Zambian ministers who consistently expressed concern for social issues adjacent to cultivating egalitarianism, the belief that men and women both have God-given spiritual authority in Christian institutions, in gender relations, African-Christian theology and local hermeneutics.²²

When Christian communities successfully reach out into areas of social need to empower marginal communities’ own “survival and resistance,” individual conversion in global evangelicalism showcases additional constructions of masculinities via “techniques of spiritual transformation” in men who exist somewhat out of reach from Christian local society institutions.²³ Hansen’s ethnography of male drug rehabilitation street ministries in urban Puerto Rico highlights social change processes within men’s choice to adopt “evangelical manhood,” a gender performance “based on domesticity, emotional responsiveness, self-sacrifice, and spiritual knowledge,” — social processes made possible in conversion by the ministries’ equalizing and empowering treatment design.²⁴ Hansen frames men’s evangelical conversion and consequent “cultural critique” of narcotrafficker male gender performance as evidence of societal ‘rupture’ and ‘re-enchantment’ leading to the “attempt to rework relationships” through Christian religion; these outcomes well integrate their experiences of marginality (e.g, their distance from the Church, marriages, their own families, and exclusion from the public sphere) and are independent from other coordinated movements for political or economic reform.²⁵ This spiritual and social empowerment through the evangelical promotion of a “middle-class, patriarchal model of the family, over the working-class, female-headed extended families from which most of its membership comes” oversteps structural oppression and incurs the same

²¹ Ibid, 167, 171.

²² Ibid, 63, 67–68.

²³ Helena Hansen, *Addicted to Christ: Remaking Men in Puerto Rican Pentecostal Drug Ministries* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018), 5, 7.

²⁴ Hansen evaluates the ministries’ treatment design as novel in the manner it contrasts to Western biomedical frameworks for treating the kind of severe drug addiction exacerbated by several structural issues in Puerto Rico; *ibid*, 14, 19.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 12, 14.

patriarchal bargain which ultimately reaffirms hegemonic masculinity performance, individualist leaps and bounds in drug rehabilitation and local social repair notwithstanding.²⁶

Even so, other cases of masculinity construction in global Christianity temper this common critique of Protestantism's inefficacy for social change in light of these discursive and ethical limitations. Gai, Woods and Cai build upon a culturalist view of Chinese Protestantism by analyzing several public variegated masculinity performances in order to highlight Christianity's key role in a collective confrontation to "militaristic" masculinities among urban male migrant factory workers domineered by hostile management at a Chinese electronics manufacturing company.²⁷ In an occupational setting plagued by a tragic trend of worker suicides among the middle-class, majority-male-migrant workforce, the researchers defend the promotion of Christian masculinity as a successful form of resistance in public society as a targeted "cultural strategy," stating: "religious masculinities are enacted by particular teachings and beliefs, but are better understood as a cultural strategy that men use to negotiate the social-cultural environment around them."²⁸ The promotion of Christian masculinity by Protestant migrant workers and managers comprehensively countered a hierarchal management structure of hypermasculine, patriarchal regulation of workers.²⁹ In turn, it offered an alternative to an antagonistic "protest masculinity" among the marginalized and oppressed laborers, and it further facilitated the creation of a company house church that established new channels of psychological and social support to counteract and change the experiences of violence among the exploited workers.³⁰

Gao attributes the disarmament of the workplace's hostile hegemonic masculinity to Christian managers and workers who embodied and empowered others to adopt a Christian masculinity that blended forms of humanist and Confucian moralities with distinctly Christian teachings and spirituality.³¹ Their discussion of this case determines that this Christian cultural strategy successfully empowered individuals to reform this dangerous social environment in ways that

²⁶ Ibid, 19.

²⁷ Quan Gao, Orlando Woods, and Xiaomei Cai, "The Influence of Masculinity and the Moderating Role of Religion on the Workplace Well-Being of Factory Workers in China," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 6250 (June 9, 2021), 1.

²⁸ Ibid, 4.

²⁹ Ibid, 8.

³⁰ Ibid, 8–9, 10–11.

³¹ Ibid, 10–11.

official structural reforms such as “providing psychological counseling, improving the working environments and wages, and reducing excessive working hours for workers” failed to prevent worker suicides.³² This moral Christian masculinity project led workers to adopt psychological values like “endurance and resilience” along with moral values such as “civility and self-discipline” in a restrictively-secular environment, one that only maintained grassroots affiliation to Christian local society, neither usurping the authority nor structures of company management — nor the managers’ agency to promote of militaristic masculinity performance.³³ Gao concluded that this “self-empowerment” did not reform structures at every level, admitting that it only “cannot alter the material base of labor exploitation per se but rather reframes the ways factory workers make sense of exploitation,” highlighting the reality that “the moderating effects of religion on workers’ well-being are conditioned by specific cultural and power relations.”³⁴ The context of this Christian masculinity discourse within a marginal community navigating several structural social issues (i.e., labor exploitation, hostile gender relations, occupational well-being) offers a novel example of the possibilities of religious masculinity projects, even where holistic societal reach had yet to be realized.

Salient aspects of marginality and hierarchy continue to resurface when searching for novel articulations of Christian masculinity and consequent social change within and beyond the sample of Protestant Christian movements examined so far from Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. Researchers have noted that their discourses import “specific cultural and power relations” not only from their local contexts but also from Western Christianity: ones that embody and advocate for gender ideologies with very different histories of marginality and social privilege — especially regarding Western evangelicalism. Advocacy against female ordination among evangelical clergymen in the Church of England and a tighter hold to more traditional ideological systems reflect how inverted circumstances of declining social privilege and a sense of cultural embattlement in post-Christian contexts shape religious discourses that come to be translated to global environments.³⁵ Theological and hermeneutical barriers to more egalitarian discourses and

³² Ibid, 12.

³³ Ibid, 12–13.

³⁴ Ibid, 13.

³⁵ Alex D. J. Fry, “Justifying Gender Inequality in the Church of England: An Examination of Theologically Conservative Male Clergy Attitudes Towards Women’s Ordination,” *Fieldwork in Religion* 14, no. 1 (2019): 8–32.

teachings on gender in the Anglican Church communicated a reactive and hierarchical collective identity which aims to ensure greater “assurance” and “control” in their post-Christian context than Gao et al.’s case where Christians engaged diverse and marginal identities while experiencing significant social capital, even when external public influence seemed to oppose their religious expression.³⁶

This research implies that these attitudes — religious or secular — also cause a ripple effect when articulated in sociocultural discourse and further when prompting political activism and action. Hansen recognizes the role of American political appeasement of “middle-class white voters shaken by black inner city riots [...] anxious about alienated Vietnam veterans who had returned to an economy bankrupted by the war” in U.S. foreign policy that worsened economic inequality and narcotrafficking in Latin America and North America where her study of the evangelical street ministries took place.³⁷ While potentially only a case of tragic political consequence, historians have recently linked these specific U.S. national and foreign policy decisions to American political leaders and voters who heavily favor anti-liberal policies on the basis of oft-labeled Christian convictions regarding national leadership and cultural hegemony — one where an American ‘crisis of masculinity’ is repeatedly emphasized as notions of hegemonic masculinity continue to be grappled with.³⁸

These Christian American masculinity discourses have yet to be analyzed in the broader scope of sociocultural division; the field of men, masculinities and religion could benefit from greater application of its concepts and frameworks at this intersection of transformed masculinities, contemporary crises, and potential social change. For now, no clearly positive or negative correlation between participation in these Christian subcultures and wider social or cultural change appears, though contextual discourses and moral developments imply novel activity at the edge of Christian ‘local society’ when religious actors identify and assert agency over personally-meaningful positions relating to hegemonic masculinities, spirituality, ethics and marginality.

³⁶ Ibid, 21.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 97.

3. Christian Masculinity Politics in the United States

Where global evangelicalism offers evidence of religious glocalization and a few novel trajectories for Christian masculinity performance, religious and cultural discourses in U.S. evangelicalism more commonly reflect certain incompatibilities between Christian masculinity politics and visions for social repair. Pessimistic evaluations regarding the co-optation of U.S. evangelical institutions reveal religious inhibitions on gender ideology and cultural engagement that exert more public influence in the United States than in other global contexts.³⁹ U.S. evangelicalism has been further identified as strengthening ideological ties with interdependent Christian branches (i.e., U.K. Evangelicalism in Fry, Zambian Pentecostalism in Klinken) through “a wider patriarchal discourse” that fosters a defensive group position in contrast to liberal gender and sociopolitical ideals, whether religious or secular.⁴⁰ Anthropologists invested in religious studies and gender studies have maintained steady research on U.S. evangelicals who have been navigating the ‘crisis’ and ‘myths of masculinity’ in American culture and society over decades, especially as seen in the rise and fall of a national mobilization of evangelical men through several men’s-only evangelical ministries that discursively engaged with social identities and U.S. politics as a broad ideological bloc with exclusionary tendencies.

This American Christian masculinity discourse came alive in a new way during this national evangelical men’s movement’s prominent activities in the 1990’s, advanced by several shifts in contemporary gender roles: the changing position of men in the American economy after the loss of the Vietnam War, the end of the Cold War, and a new culture that no longer unambiguously privileged male breadwinning and authority in society.⁴¹ These evangelical initiatives for cultural engagement appear differently to anthropologists and historians, with some arguing that their maintained discourses and ideologies have tightly linked evangelical identity to cultural and political beliefs that flow outside of evangelical Christianity’s theological and ethical heritage in ways that reinforce a confessionally-Christian, racially-white conservative social bloc around

³⁹ Anderson et al., *Studying Global Pentecostalism*, 79.

⁴⁰ Fry, “Justifying Gender Inequality in the Church of England,” 19, 27.

⁴¹ Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 153–54.

prescriptive political objectives and affiliations.⁴² Some of these emphasized convictions speak volumes of U.S. evangelicalism's outlook on American culture and society in recent years:

More than any other religious demographic in America, white evangelical Protestants support preemptive war, condone the use of torture, and favor the death penalty. They are more likely than members of other faith groups to own a gun, to believe citizens should be allowed to carry guns in most places, and to feel safer with a firearm around. White evangelicals are more opposed to immigration reform and have more negative views of immigrants than any other religious demographic. [...] More than half of white evangelical Protestants think a majority nonwhite US population would be a negative development. White evangelicals are considerably more likely to believe that Islam encourages violence, to refuse to see Islam as "part of mainstream American society," and to perceive "natural conflict between Islam and democracy." At the same time, white evangelicals believe that Christians in America face more discrimination than Muslims.⁴³

This list goes on. These notable "evangelical" beliefs contextualize Du Mez's argument that an ideology of "militant masculinity" brings unity to these religious and social discourses, "an ideology that enshrines patriarchal authority and condones the callous display of power, at home and abroad" and justifies "a traditionalist gender ideology" in American culture and society.⁴⁴

U.S. history generally appeals to the verity of a 'militant masculinity' ideology well-connected to early 20th-century religious and cultural discourses that warned of an approaching emasculated and liberalized U.S. Christianity alongside the sociological reshaping of a white Christian America.⁴⁵ The embattled ideology's "defense of patriarchal power" in the United States of the 20th and 21st centuries appears to have driven this selective style of evangelical engagement in American social life and political activism against adjacent liberal causes such as the U.S. civil rights movement and the Western feminist movement, defining the opponents that these 'evangelicals' should recognize in everyday life: "communists, feminists, liberals, secular humanists, 'the homosexuals,' the United Nations, the government, Muslims, and immigrants" being a few that Du Mez (a lifelong evangelical American) highlights from decades of American Christian discourse.⁴⁶ With these dynamics imported into conservative Protestantism in the U.S.,

⁴² John W. Compton, *The End of Empathy: Why White Protestants Stopped Loving Their Neighbors* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁴³ Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 4.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 3–4.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 6–7.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 11–12, 13.

Du Mez argues that “the ‘good news’ of the Christian gospel has become inextricably linked to a staunch commitment to patriarchal authority, gender difference, and Christian nationalism, and [...] intertwined with white racial identity” dividing “Americans — and American Christians — into those who embrace these values, and those who do not.”⁴⁷ Meanwhile, the promotion of these values through “the diffusion of an evangelical consumer culture” over time has masked several key differences between contemporary *religious U.S. evangelicals* and *cultural U.S. evangelicals*, leaving the religious institutions of “establishment evangelicalism” — a network of religious, commercial and faith-based organizations that promote these values in their worldviews and religious work — coopted by or consolidated into “a broad spectrum of religious and political commitments” messaging “a nostalgic yearning for a mythical ‘Christian America,’ a return to ‘traditional’ gender roles, and the reassertion of (white) patriarchal authority.”⁴⁸ Additional scholars agree that U.S. evangelicalism today functions as a “political” and racialized cultural fold that lacks a balancing “intellectually and spiritual authority” to positively order these spiritual, cultural, and political affinities.⁴⁹

The realization of an American-Christian masculinity discourse within these spheres of cultural and political influence reaffirms the salience of social identities and societal structures in the construction and transformation of religious masculinities. The patriarchal gender hegemony produced by such influence is easily recognizable in ‘militant masculinity’ attitudes and affinities; U.S. evangelical transformations of masculinity are considerably influenced by the intersectionality and subcultural context of this ideology. Bridges and Pascoe’s conceptualization of “hybrid masculinities” captures this relation between masculinity performance, social identity and power to conceptualize the role even reconstructed masculinities play in covertly “reproduc[ing] contemporary systems of gender, race, class, and sexual inequality” to preserve “existing ideologies and systems of power and inequality” in altered gender norms.⁵⁰ This

⁴⁷ Ibid, 6–7.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 8–10.

⁴⁹ Anthea Butler, *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 12; Molly Worthen, *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 4.

⁵⁰ Tristan Bridges and C. J. Pascoe, “Hybrid Masculinities: New Directions in the Sociology of Men and Masculinities,” *Sociology Compass* 8, no. 3 (2014): 246–58; Tristan Bridges and C. J. Pascoe, “On the Elasticity of

refreshed take on gender hegemonies conceptualizes the potential promotion of a broad ‘hegemonic masculine bloc’ and embodied *hybrid-hegemonic masculinities* that appropriate socially-advantageous styles of masculinity performance while reinforcing structures of gender inequality.⁵¹ This conceptual frame leaves an analysis of ‘militant masculinity’ open to more moderate and intercultural religious spaces and discourses where masculinity politics remain salient in greater identity politics, like in Du Mez’s interpretation of the U.S. Christian civil religion. These spaces can demonstrate how shifts in normative masculinity performance “have taken place in ways that have sustained existing ideologies and systems of power and inequality” in U.S. evangelicalism and its culturalist and political networks.⁵²

Anthropological studies contemporary to the evangelical men’s movement support Bridges and Pascoe’s theorization of intractable “soft patriarchy” masculinities within U.S. evangelicalism. Analyses of charismatic and non-charismatic evangelical families emphasized discursive patterns of “symbolic traditionalism” and “pragmatic egalitarianism” characterizing a subcultural defense of gender traditionalism in the modernizing post-industrial environment.⁵³ The evangelical masculinity communicated by these rhetorical systems adapted ‘male headship’ authority into the masculine role of family “protector (husband *as warrior*)” over the outdated “provider” role — discursively rejecting feminist ideals for gender equality in tune with 20th century ‘muscular Christianity’ and U.S. family values politics.⁵⁴ The 1990’s civil society organization and evangelical-male powerhouse, the Promise Keepers (‘PK’), echoed these same value positions with increased hybridization and culturalist authorization through the mobilization of national stadium conferences featuring prominent evangelical leaders in addition to grassroots-local Bible studies and accountability groups — all directed at tackling America’s ‘crisis of masculinity’ through public engagement outside of the Church.⁵⁵

Gender Hegemony: Why Hybrid Masculinities Fail to Undermine Gender and Sexual Inequality,” in *Gender Reckonings: New Social Theory and Research* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 258–60.

⁵¹ Ibid, 260.

⁵² Bridges and Pascoe, “On the Elasticity of Gender Hegemony,” 258.

⁵³ Gallagher and Smith, “Symbolic Traditionalism and Pragmatic Egalitarianism,” 214–15, 227–28.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 228; Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 171.

⁵⁵ Bartkowski, “Breaking Walls, Raising Fences,” 38.

The Promise Keepers best demonstrated how evangelical projects specific to the transformation of masculinities have produced hybrid masculinities that continue to encourage divisive and defensive collective religious identities. Bartkowski found that the Promise Keepers negotiated “a highly instrumentalist vision of masculinity [...] predicated on the notion of innate, categorical, and largely immutable gender difference (i.e., radical essentialism)” and “expressive masculinity,” paradoxically authorizing visions of both “marital egalitarianism” and “instrumental defenses of a patriarchal family” that represent the different pulls of evangelical “ideoculture.”⁵⁶ Transforming masculinities through primarily “shared experiences” and “cultural resources,” PK was at times able to convene a wide range of socio-economic, racial, ethnic, and denominational backgrounds through a variety of masculinity “approaches,” affording peace between theological and ideological positions.⁵⁷ Without a centralized creed, PK’s chief ideology was characterized as a ‘practical counseling’ approach (prioritized above other PK approaches, i.e., “psychological archetypes” approach, “biblical feminist” approach) that left “the details of where ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ come from or what gender roles are supposed to be” open to interpretation in order to facilitate conflict resolution, e.g. marital disagreements, household decision-making, etc.⁵⁸ However, additional analysis suggests that ideological tension in the “social movement” and its broad culturalist “constituency” led to divisive outcomes via particular practices in the organization’s programs and its eventual decline.⁵⁹

Bartkowski emphasizes the role of “dividing practices” through which Promise Keepers “define[d] godly masculinity in juxtaposition to a strategically chosen ‘other’ (male homosexuality, erotic intimacy, and femininity)” — subsequently framing ‘godly’ hybrid masculinity within “the reification of essential masculinity — often juxtaposed to perceived feminine dispositions.”⁶⁰ Though silent on authoritative gender ideology and vulnerable to “many cultural presuppositions about gender roles and behavior,” these observations place Lockhart’s moderate evaluation that “Promise Keepers thus commit to an ethic without a clear underlying philosophy or ideology” in a different light, signaling the inability of PK masculinity to overcome

⁵⁶ Ibid, 35, 37–38; Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 152.

⁵⁷ Lockhart, “‘We Are One Life,’ but Not of One Gender Ideology,” 77–78.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 81

⁵⁹ Ibid, 74.

⁶⁰ Bartkowski, “Breaking Walls, Raising Fences,” 45, 47, 51.

its evangelical identity politics.⁶¹ In reality, PK masculinity discourse “both challenged and reaffirmed hegemonic gender and racial meanings” holding tightly to evangelical identity and ideologies highlighted by Du Mez.⁶² The PK project for the transformation of masculinities experienced a widely-observed rise and “decline” that, as Du Mez and others narrate, resulted in the Promise Keepers’ rebranding into an organization and masculinity discourse aligned with more militant visions of manhood after the September 11 attacks, communicating their refined vision of American Christian masculinity to their core support base — white, conservative evangelical men.⁶³ Additional research in even more recent subcultures such as the Christian Hardcore punk music scene demonstrate how extra-religious collective masculine identities, such as “the rejected” (in McDowell’s study, “young white men who feel excluded by the church and/or society at large for being social misfits”), persist among evangelicals, continuing to mobilize religious and secular men to cultural-war combat through the performance of an antagonistic masculinity subscribed to Christian nationalist ideologies and an essential ‘gender order.’⁶⁴

The divisive discourses and mechanisms examined in past U.S. evangelical projects for the transformation of masculinities reveal several intractable ideologies from historic U.S. Christian identity politics where American evangelicals remain significantly entrenched. Their consequent style of Christian cultural engagement in generations of American Christianity has, through the reaffirmation of an ideology of ‘militant masculinity,’ continued to reject intentional alternatives to exclusionary and ‘other-ing’ religious masculinity performance. This historic movement unto a polarized public sphere remains seriously relevant to religious influence for improved gender relations and the hope for social repair in U.S. religion and society.

⁶¹ Lockhart, “‘We Are One Life,’ but Not of One Gender Ideology,” 86.

⁶² Melanie Heath, “Soft-Boiled Masculinity: Renegotiating Gender and Racial Ideologies in the Promise Keepers Movement,” *Gender and Society* 17, no. 3 (2003): 440.

⁶³ Ibid, 435; Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 183–84; Lockhart, “‘We Are One Life,’ but Not of One Gender Ideology,” 87–88.

⁶⁴ Amy D. McDowell, “Aggressive and Loving Men: Gender Hegemony in Christian Hardcore Punk,” *Gender and Society* 31, no. 2 (2017): 226, 230–31.

4. Theoretical Framework: Christian Masculinity Construction and Social Repair

The literature reviewed places a high value on further analysis of gender performance, ideologies and discourses within global evangelical Christianity, providing a substantial warrant to analyze the influence of gender discourses in exacerbating exclusionary religious ideologies and societal engagement. In defense of this view, U.S. Christian masculinity discourses — where ‘man’ and ‘masculinity’ have historically existed in a “pre-discursive” binary that shape the subsequent cultural possibilities for gender performance — exist within a matrix of cultural and political discourses that co-constitute hegemonic or equalizing beliefs and behaviors, according to social-constructivist theorization.⁶⁵ The historically exclusionary and defensive ideologies of U.S. evangelicals have situated Christian visions for masculinity and its ethics according to this pre-discursive ‘locus of intractability’:

whether in “sex” or “gender” or in the very meaning of “construction,” [which] provides a clue to what cultural possibilities can and cannot become mobilized through any further analysis. [...] These limits are always set within the terms of a hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality. Constraint is thus built into what that language constitutes as the imaginable domain of gender.⁶⁶

Even in intractability, Butler promotes Beauvoir’s presentation of agency (“a *cogito*”) by which gender is constructed and performed in contextual relationships and cultures.⁶⁷ Mahmood builds upon this in order to draw out “moments of disruption of, and articulation of points of opposition to” gender hegemonies (i.e., hegemonic/hybrid masculinities) through individual agents’ own discursive and embodied articulations of gender and religion, even among those subjected to intractable (pre-)discursive ideologies.⁶⁸ According to Mahmood, these moments of disruption, framed in terms of gendered subjects’ own agency, do not only signal acquiescence or

⁶⁵ Judith Butler, “Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire,” in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 2011), 10.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶⁸ Saba Mahmood, “Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival,” *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 2 (2001): 206, emphasis in original.

“resistance” to oppression but rather “a capacity for action that specific relations of *subordination* create and enable.”⁶⁹

Butler and Mahmood’s theories on gender and agency provide critical tools from feminist studies for understanding the implications of Christian gender projects on religious communities’ cultural engagement and sociopolitical impact. On the surface, the often-essentialist construction of U.S. Christian masculine identity and gender performance do not seem to yield societal flourishing, yet research on the influence of the American evangelical men’s movement on masculinity discourses worldwide point to their abilities to elicit social change at various levels. Gender projects from the U.S. evangelical men’s movement failed to engender social change, instead reifying systems of prejudice and inequality in American society.⁷⁰ The culturalist-evangelical affinities for neo-traditionalist gender ideology and defensive identity politics thus far have inhibited its aims in “transforming the contemporary culture for Christ;” however, at the level of Christian local society, cases from global and U.S. evangelicalism demonstrate the potential for local-level social effect independent of partisan influences and narratives.⁷¹

Apart from Christian ministries and discourses around men, masculinities and religion embedded in Christian local society institutions, the work of “transforming masculinities” is being established in a changing landscape where faith-based civil society today is inviting both individual “men and women” to support development and strengthening public institutions through religious gender projects.⁷² Additionally, partnering local-level religious institutions such as Christian churches offer global precedent for facilitating *social repair* across highly-polarizing sociopolitical divides, an outcome described by Brewer, Higgins, and Teeney as “reconciliation between erstwhile protagonists, social-relationship building and repair across the communal divide, and the replacement of brokenness by the development (or restoration) of people’s feelings of wholeness.”⁷³ This is especially true in cases like current U.S. religious-political

⁶⁹ Ibid, 210.

⁷⁰ Heath, “Soft-Boiled Masculinity,” 427.

⁷¹ Gallagher and Smith, “Symbolic Traditionalism and Pragmatic Egalitarianism,” 229; Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 13–14.

⁷² Prabu Deepan, “Transforming Masculinities: A Training Manual for Gender Champions” (Tearfund, 2017).

⁷³ John D. Brewer, Gareth I. Higgins, and Francis Teeney, *Religion, Civil Society, and Peace in Northern Ireland* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 5.

discourse and the Northern Ireland conflict where national “conflict is *experienced* as religious and takes on religious forms” in demarcating diversifying “social boundaries” and “shap[ing] some of the meaning behind people’s identity construction,” like in militant masculinity discourse.⁷⁴ Brewer et al. reflect on the role of Christian churches in achieving social peacemaking outcomes as members of ‘the civil sphere’ in the Northern Ireland peace processes and ongoing collective healing, facilitating a conceptual leap that connects local society religious institutions to wider coalitions promoting ‘social virtues’ that are capable of positively enhancing solidarity or inversely exacerbating social or cultural division “around ‘race’, religion, gender and its other structural social divisions that ‘bonding social capital’ does not seem to capture.”⁷⁵

The ‘dark side of civil society’ recognized by Brewer’s conceptualization of the civil sphere productively reframes perspectives from previous research on the salience of Christian masculinity discourses in reference to the overall cultural and political polarization that defines American civil discourse today. Those leading and advocating from an ideology of ‘militant masculinity’ in U.S. political and cultural discourse are shown to utilize social capital to cultivate “solidarity and political activism within racist, xenophobic and authoritarian groups” through civil society organizations in ways that significantly contribute to unrest and division in American public life.⁷⁶ Though the conflict between ‘militant masculinity’ and alternative religious masculinities represent only one point at which to confront U.S. Christianity’s intractable ideologies in the polarized U.S. civil sphere, the demonstrated influence of gender projects within networks of contemporary sociopolitical issues as well as the faith-based civil sphere’s capability to elicit social repair should not be overlooked. The construction of religious masculinities in the United States is a historical project that continues today and bears greatly on how religious traditions, their implicit ideologies, and their communities experience transformation, if at all. New insights can be gained on the discursive shifts taking place in American Christianity on masculinity performance and its inherent ideologies that forecast the restoration of individual identities and societal relationships.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 2, 9.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 19.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 18

5. The Case: *Myth Quest*

With this context in mind, the following study aims to build upon the foundation provided for examining Christian masculinity construction and the possibilities offered by alternative Christian masculinities to ameliorate or exacerbate gender relations and social division in local and national contexts. New faith-based ventures and start-up organizations in the American civil sphere — non-profits, media outlets, think tanks, independent creators, etc. — are facilitating new opportunities for Christian engagement with cultural discourses and social issues in ways that have often been inhibited, rejected or opposed by religious institutions (e.g., “establishment evangelicalism”) and the enduring defensive partisan coalition on the ‘dark side of the civil sphere.’⁷⁷ Past research has predominantly focused on the transformation of masculinities in religious spaces, principally searching for social and structural shifts in gender relations: in these studies, articulations of the theological content of a “transformed” masculinity and any intentional theory of change have remained addenda to social scientific investigation. However, the unavoidable realities of pluralization and polarization in global faith traditions and national politics today have reframed historic discourses on a ‘crisis of masculinity’ in ways that permit greater pragmatic, cultural and religious integration in masculinity transformation. For example, the following case of *Myth Quest* independently facilitated an independent, start-up project for Christian masculinity transformation through the total use of virtual platforms and content creation to produce an original framework for male community and growth that instantaneously-accessible around the globe — a gender project impossible at the start of the U.S. evangelical men’s movement. Further, this cohesive multi-national and virtual platform for instruction and gathering prompted a Christian gender discourse previously unseen in past literature, exhibiting vastly different trends of religious negotiation and embodiment of equal gender norms, acceptance of diversity, and promotion of peacebuilding virtues and behaviors.

The main question that has guided this study is ***‘How do American Christian pilot programs focused on the construction of masculinities reveal religious discourses on men and masculinities that differ from the historic evangelical men’s movement in the United States?’*** Reflecting on previous anthropological, historical and sociological research, this question aims to

⁷⁷ Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 7.

uncover novel contributions to cultural discourse on religion and gender that comparatively disrupt feedback loops of sociopolitical division and polarization. One following sub-question that will more clearly interrogate the level to which evangelical thought and belief is integrated into these novel contributions is ***'How do the theologies of these programs compare to dominant evangelical theology and belief?'*** One final sub-question that facilitates this inquiry into Christian masculinity transformation's potential for social repair is framed by the question ***'How do these pilot programs ascribe 'social virtues' (such as empathy, egalitarianism, etc.) to a transformed Christian masculinity?'*** The primary research question and two sub-questions outline new goals that aim to advance the field's understanding masculinity construction in Western Christianity in light of the emergent role of Christianity in peacebuilding and social reconciliation efforts around the globe. The nature of the United States' present social polarization and its ties to an ongoing 'culture war' posits that novel developments in religious cultural engagement could compellingly yield new data to the field of religion, men and masculinities while contextualizing previous research.

The case provided is a pilot initiative focused on the transformation of Christian masculinities in its first year of programming. The start-up solo enterprise, *Myth Quest*, was founded by Tyler, an American Christian entrepreneur in 2022 to offer "a rite of passage adventure for men" through online video instruction, shared personal work and weekly video calls with all course participants. The organization's website and marketing via social media content advertising the start of the *Myth Quest's* debut virtual course outlines the organization's chief inspiration by Joseph Campbell's monomyth paradigm (aka., "the hero's journey"). Tyler's invitational rhetoric of "taking up your cross," referring to Christian discipleship and Jesus' crucifixion, alludes to a uniquely Christian adaptation of Campbell's hero's journey that encompasses similar utilizations of the monomyth by analytical psychologists and the late 20th-century mythopoetic men's movement contemporary to the U.S. evangelical men's movement.⁷⁸ When initially outlining the research process, I planned on conducting additional field work with a Christian peacebuilding non-profit that runs an independent masculinity project for "culture-dominant" Christian

⁷⁸ The late 20th-century mythopoetic movement's "psychological archetypes" approach to male identity and gender performance has previously been used to compare and analyze Christian gender ideologies in the Promise Keepers: in Lockhart, "'We Are One Life,' but Not of One Gender Ideology," 79.

ministers from any denomination. In the end, access to this additional cohort could not be arranged and would have proven too taxing to complete a careful analysis.

Campbell's 'hero's journey' and *Myth Quest's* paradigm are not a one-for-one match; *Myth Quest's* pragmatic and religious adaptations to the paradigm through the integration of Christian rhetoric and symbology in its twelve-step program critically communicate elements of the organization's unique vision to engage individual participants in transformed Christian masculinity and communal "flourishing." The program specifically targets individual men who desire to make changes in their lives particularly in the areas of local society highlighted in the literature on the construction of Christian masculinities. Even so, the promotional materials individual growth in these areas as producing a participant "transformed to positively impact his community," positing real potential for faith-based social change through "relationships" unlimited by religious institutions. No criteria to join are advertised, though the pilot program utilizes an affordable paid-access plan for most of its participants in order to encourage the men's full commitment to the course while funding all program instruction, platforms and facilitation provided by Tyler as the sole director of *Myth Quest*.

Myth Quest presently offers one 12-week course built around a "cohort curriculum" that is conducted through online individual workshopping (via video instruction and reflection guides) and group meetings for discussion on Discord, an instant messaging and virtual meeting platform. *Myth Quest* distinguishes its framework for accomplishing personal transformation and change from other similar "self-help fixes," outlining participants' "spheres of influence" in their communities as they define unique visions for masculine "Universal" and "Individual Calls" in their lives. The organization promises to offer a unique look into the evolution of programs focused on Christian masculinity construction contextualized in the United States' "Uncertain Times," including a diverse "community" participating across the U.S. and Canada. This evolved American Christian masculinity space for online weekly discussions and instant messaging offers a new setting within which to record and analyze religious discourses on a wide range of topics with greater ease, availability, and clarity.

5. Methodology

This study has taken a qualitative approach to the study of religion, men and masculinities and the study of religion and peacebuilding to discern *which* factors advance or disrupt the construction of adversarial identity-based ideologies while additionally providing an explanation for *how* and *why* these factors remain influential in the context of American religion, culture and politics today. My aim is to understand the nature and function of various discourses and ideologies that facilitate identity-based cultural and religious movements while producing key observations and explanations on the construction of (non)adversarial religious masculinities that will guide further study and theorization. Due to the religious and cultural nature of these phenomena, ethnographic research will be conducted with a key awareness of theological influences and peacebuilding theory useful to transforming religious identities, ideologies and corresponding sociocultural conflicts in the United States today.⁷⁹

Digital Ethnography

Data collection was primarily conducted through my personal observations with the pilot *Myth Quest* course during the 3.5 months of online activity of the cohort, taking place from late-January to early-May 2023. The data featured results from my engagement in the virtual environment as both an observer and a participant in the program as requested by the founder of *Myth Quest*; in this way, I came to share a deep personal trust with the participants through the progression of the course and during my time as a member.

The instruction component of the *Myth Quest* pilot course was composed of videos and documents created by the founder and uploaded to the business/course management software Kajabi which each participant was given access to. The weekly online gatherings took place over Discord each Thursday evening (local-U.S. time) and would last for 1.5-2 hours in length on average with a range of 3-12 participants attending each week, including Tyler as the cohort's guide. (Due to my residence in the Netherlands, I would join the cohort meetings at 3:00 CET on Friday mornings.) The online gatherings were conducted through group video calls where each

⁷⁹ John Paul Lederach, "Conflict Transformation," Text, Beyond Intractability, July 6, 2016, <https://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/transformation>.

participant could appear individually to the entire group and participate in casual conversations to get to know other participants in addition to the focused conversation on the workshopped weekly topics. It was also an “accountability” space where each participant could share the progress made or obstacles encountered on their individual ‘Quest’ as they applied the adapted hero’s journey framework to their own lives through the design of the 12-week course. Though structured, Tyler and the participants treated the weekly online gatherings as a social and casual space. Additionally, none of the group members, nor Tyler, appealed to anonymity or avatars during gatherings, often sharing identities and personal information freely.

Researchers in the social sciences share a general appreciation for digital (or virtual) ethnography as more opportunities are created for comprehensive ethnographic research in virtual worlds and through digital access and observation today.⁸⁰ Digital ethnography remains a largely unutilized method among Christian men’s groups in previously published research, forecasting potentially novel research on this topic. This research contextualizing *Myth Quest* among other Christian masculinity projects is benefitted by the availability of digital ethnography methods, without which this case study would have been impossible. In this case, ethnography carefully utilized *Myth Quest’s* virtual activities to critically examine the casual relationships between ideologies observed in historical and contemporary U.S. Christian communities while opening a window with which to complete religious and cultural analysis according to the integration, rejection or transformation of these larger ideas by *Myth Quest’s* Christian male participants.⁸¹ A naturalist approach to data collection was meant to reinforce my (the researcher’s) methodological agnosticism, the critical tendency to frame subjects as ‘anthropologically strange’ in familiar contexts “in an effort to make explicit the presuppositions that culture members take for granted,” and to make familiar “cultural phenomena” more available for analysis.⁸²

With the content of *Myth Quest* being intentionally-designed for and shared within the virtual platforms for communication and gathering, the intentional use of digital space permits a chief

⁸⁰ Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, *Ethnography: Principles in Practice* (Milton, UK: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 140.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 7–8.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 9.

focus on the group's discourse instead the event of discourse. The virtual format permitted me to conduct the data collection process not only from an international residence but also with an accessible "hyperdata" collection of all videos, documents, recorded gatherings, and instant messages that remained available for my analysis, providing an opportunity to make more connections and examine in greater depth.⁸³ The primary limitation of this approach to examining evolutions in programs for the construction of masculinities is precisely due to its exchange of 'rigor' for the 'flexibility' outlined above.⁸⁴ Though the participant environment is unique, it establishes an additional layer of removal to further examine how the discourses and actions prompted in *Myth Quest's* virtual activities comprehensively translate into embodied changes and pragmatic action in the participants' lives. Even so, the participants' physical and emotional reactions to their interpersonal exchanges and live reflections to their cohort on the topics discussed regularly introduced embodied data for observation.

Discourse Analysis

Through my engagement as a participant in the course and its pilot cohort, my virtual ethnography methodology included ongoing discourse analysis concerning *Myth Quest's* original course content, the digital messages and online conversations shared within the cohort, and the overall interpretation and use of the rhetorical concepts and themes by Tyler and the participants. This was further complemented by an in-depth review of the academic literature available on masculinity construction projects and discourses in national and international expressions of Protestant Christianity, including detailed evaluations of U.S. Christian men's groups and programs at least one generation older than *Myth Quest*: a significant gap. In analyzing the prominent discourses around masculinity performance, gender ideologies, religious identity and social repair, I organized the data provided by academic literature, the videos published by *Myth Quest* according to original deductive and inductive codes I created to examine the interplay of the analytical concepts and themes raised by previous scholars on the topic.⁸⁵

⁸³ Ibid, 148–49.

⁸⁴ Tom Boellstorff et al., *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 87.

⁸⁵ Oliver Freiberger, *Considering Comparison: A Method for Religious Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 169.

The coding and analysis of these codes and all the materials under study was handled in Atlas.ti with the aid of Transkriptor for producing transcripts of all course videos, cohort video calls, and one interview with Tyler, totaling approximately 39.1 hours of coded data. The theoretical and pragmatic blending of continuous digital ethnography and discourse analysis particularly makes the two methods difficult to distinguish, perhaps undermining some of their unique optimizations in this analysis.⁸⁶ Further, the utilization of Atlas.ti was my second-choice for data analysis when restraints on research funding prevented me from acquiring Nvivo 14 for my data analysis. This, and my novice experience with Atlas.ti and the coding process, resulted in my first-order data analysis taking more time than I originally intended.

Interviews

During my observations and participation with the debut cohort of *Myth Quest*, it became evident that interviews with Tyler or a few selected participants from the cohort would very effectively complement my overall analysis. Tyler and several participants shared openly about their upbringings in U.S. evangelicalism and their familiarity with North American (e.g., traditional-dominant) evangelical theology and thought. Ultimately, I performed one 1.5-hour interview with Tyler one month after the conclusion of the *Myth Quest* pilot course. In this way, Tyler shared previously unknown details about the organizational design of *Myth Quest* and Tyler's personal story, inspiration and key goals for the continuation of *Myth Quest* after its first year of official programming.⁸⁷ In the same fashion as the cohort gatherings, Tyler's interview was conducted through the use of digital meeting software (Zoom) and arranged via instant messaging on Discord.

Ethics

In this research, I have aimed to responsibly "inspire" and "empower" the subjects of my study through a pattern of research that invites beneficence for 'redemptive' critique and action

⁸⁶ Hammersley and Atkinson, *Ethnography*, 87.

⁸⁷ Sandra Kostere and Kim Kostere, *The Generic Qualitative Approach to a Dissertation in the Social Sciences: A Step by Step Guide* (London: Routledge, 2021), 34.

within the field of study and affected communities.⁸⁸ To me, this is a commitment to pursue research topics and methods that may “improve circumstances” for the subjects of study while maintaining an analytical intentionality that doubly avoids the temptation of ‘armchair anthropology’ as well.⁸⁹ For these ends, particular consideration was given to my time with the men of *Myth Quest* and my methods for private data collection and analysis. After reaching out via email to introduce myself and explain my intent to research, Tyler eagerly accepted my participation in the pilot program as a researcher on Christian and cultural discourses on masculinity and a committed and paying participant of the cohort.⁹⁰ This access granted also allowed access to all program materials in addition to the video recordings of the cohort’s weekly gatherings on Thursday nights.

I informed the cohort of my status as a researcher within the group in addition to disclosing my nationality and faith to warrant my interest in the topic and in participating in the pilot program at this time. Informed consent was simultaneously elicited from the participants during the first cohort meeting, where I overtly described my research and my intention to record and analyze shared communications and weekly gatherings with their permission at the encouragement of Tyler, who I previously shared my approach via email.⁹¹ This came with the invitation to ask any questions related to my research and my use of the conversations and observations as data and the disclosure of their “right to determine their own participation in research, including the right to refuse participation,” at which I would excuse myself from the group and from utilizing the weekly meetings as data for this research.⁹² Fortunately, the cohort only expressed their curiosity and positive interest in my role as a researcher and participant, and none ever revoked the consent granted to me at the start of the program.

I reaffirmed respect of all persons and their opportunity to private conversation about personal and sensitive topics in my extension of participant confidentiality to all identities, events and sensitive details via careful description and self-selected pseudonyms (a prospect that Tyler

⁸⁸ Monique Hennink, Inge Hutter, and Ajay Bailey, *Qualitative Research Methods* (SAGE Publications, 2020), 71, 72–73.

⁸⁹ Hammersley and Atkinson, *Ethnography*, 15.

⁹⁰ Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey, *Qualitative Research Methods*, 75.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 71, 78.

⁹² *Ibid*, 71.

and cohort positively and playfully approached in one of our weekly online gatherings).⁹³ The use of pseudonyms in addition to my strategy to exit the cohort if needed were provided in order to guard the participants against the undesired disclosure and superfluous interpretation of vulnerable personal details, life stories, or events taking place within the cohort in the final analysis and presentation of my observations.⁹⁴ I worked to carry out my description and analysis with the upmost intentionality and compassion, further maintaining these mechanisms for confidentiality and privacy in the final record of my time spent with *Myth Quest* and taking care to avoid misinterpreting the words and ideas of *Myth Quest*, its founder and its participants superfluously.

Researcher Positionality

My positionality as a researcher in this group is as a white, male American and practicing non-denominational Christian. My position in the study of global and U.S. evangelicalism is framed by my experiences as a fourth-generation member of the U.S. Churches of Christ, through which I have observed evangelical Christianity first-hand in both rural Arkansas and suburban California in early life and during my Bachelor studies in theology (concluded in 2022). I maintain my personal cultural and religious heritage from this branch of U.S. evangelicalism; I find that living between a local context of a more-fundamentalist American Christianity and more-mainline expressions of Protestantism complements this study and the composition *Myth Quest's* cohort well. The cohort itself was composed of 18 young to mid-life, middle-class men participating in the program from across the United States with two participants from Canada. To my knowledge, all participants except myself were married, most with young families. There was a large indication across the group of minimum university-level education with several participants utilizing several graduate-level educations in medicine, psychology and Protestant/evangelical theology. The majority of participants in the program were white, or at least white-passing. Every member of the group had a range of substantial to surpassing normative experience in U.S. Christianity.

⁹³ Hammersley and Atkinson, *Ethnography*, 228; *ibid.*

⁹⁴ Hammersley and Atkinson, *Ethnography*, 221–22.

6. Christian Men of Agency, “Empathy” and “Grace”: A Spiritual Challenge to ‘Militant Masculinity’

Myth Quest’s promoted masculinity performance is not so much representative of a religious or exclusively-evangelical quality or prescriptive purity (e.g., ‘*evangelical* masculinity’, ‘*biblical* masculinity’, ‘*godly* masculinity’) as it is, rather, its *purifying* “aims” — for individual men themselves and those around them. Centered on Jesus Christ as the revelation of God’s character and the catalyst for a transformed life by the power of the Holy Spirit, this masculinity performance does not aim to defend these (or any) fundamental Christian convictions via its course but principally guides its participants to embrace “a life of more adventure, purpose and calling” defined by *Myth Quest’s* core values of “truth, beauty and goodness” and the “flourishing of all” in the participants’ social spheres. This spiritual vision for transforming men, overcoming cultural crises of masculinity, and affecting society is realized through what I characterize as *Myth Quest’s* “*redemptive*” *Christian masculinity*, which promotes a masculinity performance marked by virtues of “empathy”, “grace”, “openness”, and “humility” that are produced in individual men who exercise agency to bring “redemption” to their personal and generational stories in the communities they inhabit. This is a spiritual masculinity that focuses on male agency and virtue cultivation, framing crises and conflicts in reference to the individual subject while working to orient these religious actors to positively — “redemptively” — live in community and plural societies according to anti-militaristic ethics and gender performance. Though expressing select core convictions affirmed in U.S. evangelicalism, this pattern in *Myth Quest’s* transformation of masculinities directly challenges the ideology of militant masculinity that “enshrines patriarchal authority and condones the callous display of power” that Du Mez locates among U.S. evangelicals today.⁹⁵

Constructing “Redemptive” Masculinity in North American Christianity

In the pilot program, ‘transforming masculinities’ is realized in individual men “taking up the call” to engage in a process of self-transformation through the *Myth Quest* course. The chief

⁹⁵ Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 3.

framework for *Myth Quest's* logic and teachings is an adapted version of the “the hero’s journey” (or the monomyth) developed by Joseph Campbell to collate human mythologies and folklores into one summative narrative through which to examine humanity’s universal logic and psychology for meaning-making. Working internationally as a content creator in the corporate world, Tyler identified the monomyth as a perfect paradigm for holistically articulating universal male identity and a ‘journey’ for personal growth. Integrated with modern psychology (as inspired by Carl Jung) and Christian spirituality, Tyler mapped out his twelve-step course for personal growth and defining holistic masculinity in terms of seasonal life “cycles” of change and representative of individual life stories.

The “hero’s journey” attracted these men to participate in *Myth Quest's* activities because of its flexible spiritual frame. The Christian men participating in the debut program initially shared in the first weekly call how valuable the course’s Christian ethos for individual identity was to them, affirming their personal qualities and interests alongside their religious identities in a manner difficult to find in institutional religious spaces. Joseph, a participant who directs an assisted care facility for adults with his wife, initiated a conversation with the cohort on how his near mid-life identity roles of Christian, husband, father and caregiver reflect this personal struggle:

JOSEPH: I think there's some of these big ideas like, 'Oh, I'm a child of God,' and, you know, 'I'm adopted into his family.' [... But,] what's the unique piece? [...] You can't just wave a magic identity wand to feel better about yourself — to make the suck go away. [...] Over the last five years since we moved, I've started going to counseling, and [...] I'm trying to really strip away a lot of the false identities that that I've carried, you know, up until the last couple of years. But it's again like what do I replace it with? Like who am I at this point, you know? [...] This is honestly one of the big reasons I was excited about this material because I've been having a hard time with this and I need to, like, figure this crap out.

Like Joseph, the eighteen men in the pilot cohort, most married and with children, share dedications to several “sacrificial” masculine roles. With the exception of one younger participant, every participant was either a father, a pastor, a medical practitioner or a professional caregiver, with some members taking on more than one of these roles. Three participants welcomed newborns with their spouses during the course — one participant and his wife welcoming their

firstborn child. In facilitating the first draft of *Myth Quest*, Tyler, a husband and father of three young children himself, proactively framed this course experience around several of these Christian local society male roles (i.e., husband, father, businessman, church volunteer), writing content as the course progressed week-to-week.

These men shared a desire to cultivate male friendships and find a community of support in navigating new life seasons brought on by sudden responsibilities like Joseph's that were made in order to facilitate recent professional shifts and cross-country moves to benefit their spouses and to help raise young children. Some shared they were participating in *Myth Quest* to find a community of support and accountability in uncovering patterns of mental and emotional unhealth inherited from dysfunctional family upbringings, high-pressured careers and recent social isolation brought on in the years since the Covid-19 pandemic — some disclosing that Christian male fathers and leaders had significantly failed them in this area. These painful personal experiences and their effect on their own masculine identities, their marriages, families and careers represented the participants' *personal* conflicts and crises as Christian American men, a crisis-frame that differed from a strictly cultural or structural 'crisis of masculinity.' *Myth Quest's* remedy came in the form of its '*redemptive Christian masculinity*,' an individual-based masculinity performance to exercise agency in personal growth and in affecting "redemption" — individual actions that lead to the "flourishing" of others — in one's relationships and communities. The attraction and influence of redemptive Christian masculinity to these men was linked not only to their common Christian masculine experiences but in its attention to these men *as individual "agents"* — a core idea reflected in its distinctly non-evangelical theology.

Throughout the *Myth Quest* video content and cohort meetings, Tyler framed the participants' desire for positive change as agentival opportunities for each individual man. These opportunities explicitly encompassed their roles as Christians, husbands, fathers, and professionals "aiming" for growth — specifically from as recipients of grace:

TYLER: The trajectory is not perfection, and it's not like, 'Whatever, I don't care.' The trajectory is, "I'm aiming at this direction and I'm going to give a lot of grace to myself in the process of getting there." And when I'm not there, that's fine. [...] And part of the gift that I can give to the people around me is being okay with who I am in this moment, never fully arriving there, but I'm aiming there."

Myth Quest's discourse of redemptive Christian masculinity maintained this key connection between Christian masculine identity and its "grace" ethic, focusing on moral and spiritual masculinity performance achieved in the cultivation of Christ-like virtues, such as "empathy," "grace," "openness," "resilience," and humility" throughout the twelve-week course. Ryan, a cohort Guide, former-evangelical, theologian and artist well-known on social media, reframed the intentional integration of male agency into these common '30-something' male roles in terms of Christian spirituality, in a conversation with Tyler published for the course:

RYAN: As Christians, for those people who do follow Jesus, our mindset should be something along the lines of [...] "I'm going to work as if every aspect of my life depended on me. I'm going to start with the core, the great goods which are orienting my life towards him [God] in love and towards others in love. And then I'm going to avail myself to absolutely every tool that will help me do that better and better." [...] I view every moment of my life as an invitation into more grace and more goodness. And so that's a choice of mine, right? I can be confronted with horrible health concerns. I can be confronted with just like bad traffic or anything in between. And it can be an invitation to say, how do I make God's Kingdom more of a reality in my life and in the life of those around me? That's an invitation that God is freely giving to me and *I have the opportunity to choose*. And it does change things, whether I can see them explicitly or not [...] because it turns me it begins to solidify God's image within me, where I become more like Jesus in these tangible ways.

The cohort's core focus on a Christian vision for male agency (i.e., "the opportunity to choose") fits nicely with Mahmood's own conceptualization of gendered religious agency. Though developed in the context of the Islamic women's mosque movement in Egypt in order to problematize contemporary utilizations of agency in feminist discourse, agency, "not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of *subordination* enable and create," can functionally represent competing masculinity discourses in Christianity too — already having been prescriptively "articulated against the hegemonic male cultural norms" (in Mahmood's case, "of Arab Muslim societies.")⁹⁶ The participants articulated agentival personal growth goals in their own life stories for "taking responsibility for [both] your life and the lives of those around you," encompassing "a capacity

⁹⁶ Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent," 203–4, 206.

for action” that differs from pure Western (i.e., Protestant) principles of “free-will” idealized in Western discourse that Mahmood is challenging in global feminist theory.⁹⁷

This affirmation of male agency in the lives of these American Christian men inductively challenged forms of Christian male identity unearthed in the men’s experiences of U.S. evangelicalism that demands Christian men’s “self-immolation” in transformed masculinity, a side-effect of their defense of patriarchal theologies and practices. Reminiscent of the Brazilian *evangélico* and Zambian Pentecostal masculinities, *Myth Quest* men described this Christian subcultural masculinity as an essential identification with one’s ‘wretchedness’ and a prescribed commitment to “whatever will serve other people” at the expense of oneself — an “asceticism” of “messianic proportions” raised in several evangelical masculinity transformations.⁹⁸ The men articulate their own “disenchantment” specifically with these Christian ideologies that have been institutionalized within Christian local society, connecting the “collateral damage of growing up in the Church” to their present masculine struggles to maintain sacrificial roles and a holistic self:

TYLER: For those of us who grew up in the Church, it's like you almost are expected to just give to the point where there's no You anymore. And I don't see that being what Jesus did, and I don't see that being what the early church leaders did. And I don't think that that's what we're that's the life that we're called to.

Like the women’s mosque movement, *Myth Quest*’s discourse of redemptive Christian masculinity promotes its participants’ cultivation of virtues in order to exercise healthy agency in a manner that negotiates evangelical asceticism while remaining authentic to their personal roles and religious identity. *Myth Quest*’s description of the Christian hero’s journey as ‘the Narrow Path’ connects this type of male agency to Christian spirituality, echoing Jesus’ teachings on living a moral and purposeful life, “a call to reliance and a call to action.”

Healthy agency is defined on the Narrow Path as “showing up,” in Tyler’s words, “in a way that is *true and authentic and moving towards a positive impact for myself and the people around me*, but is also slow enough to enjoy the beauty and the joy and the grace of this crazy thing that’s life.” As Ryan framed for these Christian men, the Narrow Path also represents the participants’

⁹⁷ Ibid, 208.

⁹⁸ Brusco, *The Reformation of Machismo*, 5; Klinken, *Transforming Masculinities in African Christianity*, 119.

spiritual empowerment by God to “aim” and to “act” in incorporating Christ-like virtues, a unique sense of calling, and “positive impact” in “enjoying” life. This discourse on Christian male agency finds its ethic for a Christ-like “redemptive” impact on the world first in this vision of one’s unique individuality and “invitation” by God to a life centered on “beauty,” “joy” and “grace.” In other words, *Myth Quest* views spiritually-empowered male agency as the catalyst for the “redemptive” transformation of masculinities, precisely opposed to prescriptive religious behavior and authoritative ideologies represented in evangelical masculinities.

Comparing Redemptive Christian Masculinity and Du Mez’s ‘Militant Masculinity’

Du Mez’s history of the rise of ‘militant masculinity’ ideology includes the gender projects like the Promise Keepers where Christian men “could find [...] both a justification for traditional masculine authority and a defense of an emotive, egalitarian, reconstructed Christian manhood.”⁹⁹ Du Mez suggests that the “cultural products” and “underlying ambiguity” of the evangelical men’s movement abetted U.S. evangelicalism’s import of ‘soft patriarchy’ and “militaristic rhetoric” that “inevitably found expression in a conservative political agenda” in and after its dispersion.¹⁰⁰ Du Mez contends that the Promise Keepers promoted a white “warrior masculinity” discourse through expanding evangelical literature which “helped forge a larger community across the evangelical subculture [...] binding disparate strands of American evangelicalism together in a shared cultural identity.”¹⁰¹

On the other hand, *Myth Quest*’s redemptive Christian masculinity comprehensively promotes a spiritual masculinity performance where men are not *ascetics* nor *aggressors* but *agents*, facilitating its transformation of masculinities by individual cultivation of “empathy” and “grace” that outline an ethical alternative to culturalist ideologies like ‘militant masculinity’ and U.S. hegemonic masculinity in general. This critique is realized in redemptive masculinity’s utilization of psychological and masculine archetypes inspired by Campbell, Jung and an evangelical masculine framework that together attribute hegemony and militancy — anecdotally including militant masculinity — to one’s inner “shadow” that must be confronted and integrated

⁹⁹ Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 153.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 154–55; Lockhart, “‘We Are One Life,’ but Not of One Gender Ideology,” 87.

¹⁰¹ Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 166.

on the hero's journey. This broad distinction between redemptive Christian masculinity and the 'shadow' militant masculinity result in contrasting Christian ideals for masculinity performance that challenge the absolutist identities and exclusionary approaches to community and cultural engagement uncovered in historic U.S. evangelicalism.

In piloting an alternative masculinity discourse, *Myth Quest* and its participants consistently critiqued the ideologies, networks and overall discourse of 'militant masculinity' as they worked to implement the course's redemptive Christian masculinity. In their 'Featured Guide' conversation, Tyler and Ryan humorously discovered their shared evangelical upbringings while discussing the core values that inform *Myth Quest's* alternative theological onus:

TYLER: So, I grew up Calvinist -

RYAN: So did I.

TYLER: Did you really?

RYAN: Yeah, I don't even say I was Reformed...

TYLER: Yeah?

RYAN: I say I was just formed.

Tyler laughs

RYAN: Nothing had to reform in me, man. [...] I grew up very Reformed. I left the tradition at a Reform Baptist seminary after my first year doing my Masters and was like, "Okay, this is not my space," and I know enough now to delineate that. [...] So, I'd read all these reformers, Puritans, etcetera, and clearly God met them. But that's because, and it's easy to say, well, "God met me here; therefore, this is the way and the only way. But that's just God's grace and incarnating the people. So, like, if I'm too stubborn to dance with my wife, she is going to be hopefully gracious and wait for me, but God's going to be like, 'Listen, if you're not going to be able to do the dancing, to do the beauty, to do the goodness, we can do truth, but I'm going to constantly try to bring you out.' And there are people that stay in their respective camps because it's controllable and because it's safe. [...] You have to be vulnerable. And if you've never been vulnerable in your life, what do you do? *You say, "This is wrong."*

Tyler and Ryan's "incarnation" of a more personal and "grace"-focused spirituality is shown to contrast to "controllable" and defensive evangelical theology and group ("camp") identity. Other participants like Clark, a husband, father, and former evangelical pastor, framed his

deconstruction of evangelical ideologies and theologies — and leaving male evangelical leadership altogether — as central to the development of better masculine identities and roles in his marriage, family and vocation. The encouragement to embody this critique of the ideologies associated with ascetic and aggressive Christian ideals of manhood empowered participants like Gerald and Shane to define redemptive masculinity in their volunteer roles in institutional church ministries: in examples like Gerald's processing with his wife — a church employee deconstructing her evangelical upbringing where she, as a woman, was explicitly limited in church and spiritual leadership — this spiritual deconstruction and reconstruction pragmatically linked redemptive Christian masculinity to critiquing historic gender hegemony at the most local level.

Some aspects of contemporary evangelicalism and militant masculinity were brought up playfully by several participants throughout the course, such as Clark's intimate experience of evangelical masculinity ideologies and networks from his young adult life in the 1990's:

CLARK: All I had when I was a teenager and in, you know, early college years was – we read Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*, and then *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* [by Josh Harris].

TYLER: **laughs** Oh, beautiful.

Another Participant: Oh, boy.

CLARK: **laughs** I was actually friends with Josh. I knew Josh. I was in his pen pal group for homeschoolers back in, like, 1988.

TYLER: **continues laughing** That's the literally the most endearing and nerdy thing I've ever heard you say.

CLARK: Yeah. [...] I didn't have all this stuff. And you know, like you, I've been reading and studying the last, you know, ten years of my life. But for me, it didn't really start until I resigned from being a pastor and kind of left that bubble that we were living in, then started, you know, 80% of the stuff in your course that would have been new to me over the last ten years.¹⁰²

¹⁰² Clark's exposure to Grudem and Harris connect his Christian upbringing quite intimately to the evangelical networks Du Mez connects to militant masculinity ideology: Harris, formerly an author an advocate for " 'biblical courtship,' the idea that fathers were charged with ensuring their daughters' purity until their wedding day, at which point [...] husbands [...] assumed the burden of protection, provision, and supervision," and Grudem, an evangelical academic and spiritual authority strongly affiliated with the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood who "advanced a theology of the Trinity [...] — according to critics — to justify the eternal, God-ordained subordination of women to men"; *ibid*, 171, 298, 303.

This critical angle further linked the aggressive trends highlighted by Du Mez in U.S. evangelicalism back to *Myth Quest's* driving mission in defining Christian masculinity on the individual "path" — both with sarcasm and sincerity:

TYLER: **sarcastically** Well, I don't know how you can be a follower of Jesus without loving guns because Jesus was such a gun nut, you know?

GERALD: **maintained sarcasm** Oh, absolutely!

WESTON: **sarcastically** He was!

Weston laughs, along with Gerald and Tyler

TYLER: This is what this is what I'm saying. [...] There's this Americanized version of Christianity that's so strange to me. I'm baffled at how little these people have actually analyzed their own values and beliefs to be able to sift the wheat from the chaff and to be able to figure out what part of their theology is influenced by their American conservative political leanings, what part is influenced by modernist thinking, what part of it is influenced by post-modernist thinking. [...] If you do any reading of church history, you're you'll be confronted pretty quickly with a lot of different expressions of Christianity that are wildly different from the American South one or the American Republican one, you know. [...] And there are a lot of biblical expectations, [...] a lot of extra-biblical expectations that are that are surrounded by the kind of American Christian culture. [...] But if you can kind of put those things aside, right, like sift the wheat from the chaff [...] when you show up in your life in the way that you're called to show up — in the way that is like true to who you are and the and the place that you're at in your life and the relationships and responsibilities that you have in your life and you shoulder those responsibilities and you and you aim up and you move forward — then nine times out of ten, like, what you're going to be doing is *showing up in a beautiful example of what it means to be a man [...] with responsibility*, shouldering that responsibility as well as you can *with as much humility and integrity and courage as you can*.

The biblical metaphor of 'separating the wheat from the chaff' dually represents *Myth Quest's* approach to ascetic American Christianity and to aggressive expressions of shadow masculinity like militant masculinity. As Tyler explains, redemptive Christian masculinity performance critically defines of Christian theology and spirituality while simultaneously intentionally contextualizing its religious angle outside of culturalist and political narratives. Redemptive Christian masculinity challenges militant masculinity and other forms of shadow masculinity in its manner of cultivating a wider range of virtues and non-hegemonic masculinity performances that counter absolutism, authoritarianism and militancy, counteracting the Church's discourse (as

phrased by Tyler) of ‘Be the man! Be the head of the house!’ with “the ordering principles of God, which include empathy and mercy and compassion and love and joy and beauty and flourishing and transformation and all that stuff that normally wouldn't be lumped into the like ‘be the man’” ideal: “flourishing for all should be the end goal.”

When workshopping redemptive Christian masculinity in reference to their personal Quests, faith histories and lifestyles, the *Myth Quest* men exhibited this critique of evangelical theologies and militant masculinity performance in individual and cultural spaces. Guides like Ryan affirmed *Myth Quest*'s pursuit of balance in masculinity transformation through their personal integration of more Eastern Christian theology in their religious lives — “finding the truth that exists underneath the rocks” and out of sight from most evangelical Christianity. Participants like Weston, Joseph and Gerald expressed their own curiosity for ancient Christian theology and philosophy, embodying the course's principles of ‘openness’ and ‘curiosity’ integrated within redemptive Christian masculinity as evidenced by weekly updates from their personal lives. Weston explained he wanted to interrogate the connections between stoicism and Christianity in order to better define “a more empowered” Christian masculinity and its place in “cultural change,” as is often uncritically sported in U.S. media and politics. Gerald often mentioned his latest intake of Christian media and literature from all across Catholic and Protestant traditions — from Franciscan mystics to non-denominational biblical scholars to ex-fundamentalist Christian writers — as he connected redemptive Christian masculinity to his devotions, service in his church and work as a medical clinician. The embodied ecumenical projects that these men included in their work towards redemptive Christian masculinity demonstrate their agentival motivations for interdenominational Christian spirituality that represent individual bridge-building efforts different than the unifying “cultural products” found at the heart of the evangelical men's movement's interdenominational activities.¹⁰³

Additionally, the course's specific transformation of masculinities, its principles and promoted virtues demonstrate how militarism itself is integrated into the ‘shadow’ as contextualized in *Myth Quest*'s redemptive Christian masculinity discourse. Anti-militaristic principles such as “Take Nothing Personally”, “Do No Harm”, “Least Necessary Force” and “Speak Life” are promoted as a

¹⁰³ Lockhart, “‘We Are One Life,’ but Not of One Gender Ideology,” 88.

genderless set of leadership skills to be used alongside other conflict management tactics like active listening, negotiating compromises, and conflict framing. The concurrent integration of one's shadow traits compounds upon weeks of work as the participants learn "self-awareness" and "emotional resilience" with which to improve "life, relationships, and overall well-being." This aspect of *Myth Quest's* transformation of masculinities guides the participants to "Recognize Triggers and Patterns," to avoid accepting "false narratives or identities," and to engage in 'shadow work' in "open dialogue" with a strategically-selected "support system." *Myth Quest's* faith-based approach counters, on these terms, the cultural narrative of the hegemonic masculinity ideology found in Du Mez's analysis that "a strong man can help make things right" — a present-day evangelical archetype of "gun-toting bravado, nostalgic imperial conquest, flag-waving (white) Christian nationalism."¹⁰⁴ In sum, the overall ideology for redemptive Christian masculinity elicits a challenge to evangelical-based militant masculinity by the healthy integration of militant masculinity's dangerous components in *Myth Quest's* framework for personal growth.

7. "Integrated" Gender Ideology: Reform Hybrid Masculinity and Egalitarianism Evidenced

Researchers have often focused similar case studies on masculinity discourses within global Christianity and evangelicalism on the gender ideologies, uncovered in Christian communities' everyday religious life (i.e., theology, religious practice) and targeted efforts to serve or shape the culture around them. Gender ideologies have provided one analytical angle from which to connect and critically analyze religion's influence on culture (and vice versa) especially as concerned with existing gender hegemonies implicitly shared between religious and secular communities. Previous study on Christian masculinity discourses in the United States shows concern for the overt and covert reification of gender hegemonies in religious communities and their gender projects through hegemonic and hybrid masculinities, and researchers demonstrate the historical and cultural continuity of pro-patriarchal discourses and structures via Christian identity politics that strategically apply ideologies conveying masculinity as 'other-than'

¹⁰⁴ Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 301.

femininity to structures of power and authority — a strategy authors like Butler and Irigaray would argue is likely pre-discursive to Christian history and orthodoxy itself.¹⁰⁵

However deeply researchers find sex-gender essentialism to be integral to Christian orthodoxy and in-tune with the power dynamics imposed by hegemonic masculinity discourses, I propose that the masculinity discourse of *Myth Quest* outlines alternative possibilities for religious masculinity performance and gender ideologies that avoid reifying gender hegemony and the ‘other-ing’ practices and structures uncovered in U.S. evangelicalism’s ideology of ‘militant masculinity.’ Kept close to the common religious institutions of Christian local society, this pilot cohort of *Myth Quest* participants often reflected on the importance of “integrated” identity to healthy masculinity performance in their marriages, families, and in the Church: “integration” referring to one’s own self-awareness and assuredness produced in *Myth Quest*’s redemptive Christian masculinity. Even so, the embeddedness of these participants’ desires for the emotional and spiritual “integration” of their masculine roles within the discourses of their Christian marriages, families and broader communities imply an additional social integration represented in their embrace of mutual gender relations: notably, the inclusion of female individuals and stereotypically-feminine virtues and roles in their journey towards masculinity transformation — an “integration” of those ‘other’ in gendered religious discourse.

The links between *Myth Quest*’s redemptive Christian masculinity directed towards “flourishing for all” and its debut participants’ actual gender norms and discourses regarding Christian marriage and leadership reveal an ‘*integrated gender ideology*’ within redemptive Christian masculinity. Improved religious gender ideology is substantiated not only by the neutrality of *Myth Quest* discourse on redemptive Christian masculinity but also by their elected mutuality of the participants’ experiences of Christian marriage. These two phenomena, though promoted by an anti-hegemonic masculinity (somewhat fitting Bridges and Pascoe’s conceptualization of hybrid masculinity), effectively undercut the effects of ‘dividing practices’ noted by Bartkowski in the discourses of the evangelical men’s movement, signaling clear reform in gender relations among contemporary Christian men engaging in the transformation of

¹⁰⁵ Butler, “Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire,” 10; Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Cornell University Press, 1985).

masculinities in this U.S. faith-based context. This overall gender ideology further demonstrates how *Myth Quest's* redemptive Christian masculinity promotes a style of masculinity reform that *integrates rather than others female identities*, with momentum to approach other social identities with the same acceptance and intentionality.

Reform Hybrid Masculinity in Myth Quest Masculinity Performance

Hegemonic masculinity as famously conceptualized and defended by Connell and Messerschmidt has provided evangelical masculinity studies an analytical frame from which to examine any “specific form of masculinity in a given historical and society-wide social setting that legitimates unequal gender relations between men and women, between masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities.”¹⁰⁶ The reformulated concept, accounting for a plurality ‘hegemonic masculinities,’ maintains that gender hegemonies are historical and “fluid” while acknowledging the importance of “intersectionality of gender with other social inequalities” and the local, regional and global” qualities of gender hierarchies.¹⁰⁷ ‘Hybrid masculinities’ have built upon these posited masculine hegemonies to emphasize superordinate masculinities which incorporate nuances of subordinate gender performances while strengthening gender inequalities: “the selective incorporation of elements of identity typically associated with various marginalized and subordinated masculinities and — at times — femininities into privileged men’s gender performances and identities.”¹⁰⁸ These concepts have continued to shape the common frame for analyzing global and U.S. Christian masculinity discourses, including militant masculinity discourse: symbolizing nationalistic ideals, “a return to ‘traditional’ gender roles, and the reassertion of (white) patriarchal authority” it outlines a contextual hegemonic masculinity in U.S. religion and culture.¹⁰⁹

Myth Quest's pilot project for the transformation of masculinities presents a strong case with which to apply these compounding theorizations from religious and gender studies onto religious actors’ reification or challenge to hegemonic gender relations. Both hegemonic masculinity and

¹⁰⁶ Messerschmidt, “The Saliency of ‘Hegemonic Masculinity,’” 86.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 87–88.

¹⁰⁸ Bridges and Pascoe, “On the Elasticity of Gender Hegemony,” 258

¹⁰⁹ Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 11.

hybrid masculinity were experienced and negotiated in different ways, however the gender ideology that accompanied *Myth Quest* masculinity performance did not reify superordinate masculinity performance nor gender hegemony, even while embodying religious sex-gender distinctions historically-normalized within Western Christianity. In this way, *Myth Quest* continues its critique of evangelical militant masculinity archetypes, its patriarchal structures and fundamentalist views of gendered spirituality as a reform of hybrid masculinity performance which imperfectly fits Bridges and Pascoe's conceptualization.

When convening the *Myth Quest* cohort for the first time, Tyler and the participants discussed how their structured space for male gathering and growth bucked against popular masculine norms in contemporary U.S. culture and Christianity. Tyler relayed that his corporate colleagues gawked at the venture, saying "guys don't do that stuff," meaning a "vulnerable" cohort gathering to pursue spiritual formation, social/emotional intelligence and open group discussions on personal growth and life struggles — a masculinity incompatible with broad cultural conceptions of American manhood. Elsewhere, Tyler's fellow church members doubted the psychological component of *Myth Quest's* projected additions to contemporary Christian masculinity discourse. Early public resistance to *Myth Quest's* activities highlights a clear hegemonic masculinity discourse that categorizes men as socially-, emotionally-, and spiritually-inaccessible — a caricature these Christian men already refute in their individual day-to-day roles; the participants themselves were unsurprised, and several affirmed *Myth Quest's* value in the face of these competing masculinity cultures. As Trey voiced, he strongly believed "there's a need for spaces like this" in U.S. Christian and secular spheres.

Even so, 'styles' of cultural hegemonic masculinities raised in studies like Bridges and Pascoe's were not discouraged from the cohort: in fact, they were often contextualized within redemptive Christian masculinity. On the surface, this is most evident in the *Myth Quest's* and the cohort's heteronormativity, fitting with Christian/evangelical teachings on gender and sexuality. *Myth Quest* assumed that Christian male participants of the course would be heterosexual and embodying a sexual determinism historically native to Christian orthodoxy and tradition: this remained unaddressed (i.e., undisputed) both in the program and among the participants. This sole negotiation of hegemonic masculinity alone makes sense only in the context of *Myth Quest's*

religious center, which refrained from extending into exclusionary discourse uncovered in among U.S. evangelical masculinity spaces.¹¹⁰

Otherwise, hegemonic masculinity expression falls primarily into categories of “style” that Bridges and Pascoe open their analysis with.¹¹¹ Brent and Joseph regularly appealed to examples from CrossFit fitness communities to articulate how they were experiencing *Myth Quest’s* challenges to them to develop humility, take disciplined action, and have grace for themselves in the process of personal transformation. However, Joseph concluded his narration of masculine CrossFit confidence-building with further disclosure of how, as “never [having] been like an ultra-confident guy,” he was progressing in additional confidence-building activities through investigating his personality and traits via talk therapy, personality typing, even the use of popular musicians to reframe his masculine identity. Both of these differing “styles” of masculine growth were validated, labeled “pragmatic” and drawn into the course’s framework for Christian spiritual formation and masculine identity development. As echoed in similar comments across the cohort, these observations demonstrate how a purely hegemonic masculinity discourse and performance *between masculinities* was consistently neutralized among the participants in the *Myth Quest* course, even where cultural styles of hegemonic masculinity performance coexisted: the cohort’s shared Christian ethos for egalitarianism remained intact.

Elsewhere, *Myth Quest* participants quickly committed to vulnerably engage with the personal work of critically examine the “patterns of belief and behavior” that have informed their own masculine identity and performance on a more local scale. One poignant component of the *Myth Quest* course, *‘Sins of the Father’* examined the unhealthy family patterns of emotionality, roles and conflict that the participants intricately linked to wider gender relations — very often in reflection on their Christian marriages and roles as husbands. Bridging masculinity discourse to these gendered roles, Tyler framed examining gendered family patterns as central to “being forces of redemption in the world”:

TYLER: This is the first part of your challenge this week: to honestly and to humbly examine the stories that you’ve inherited, the patterns of belief and behavior that made-up your

¹¹⁰ Kristin Aune, “Between Subordination and Sympathy: Evangelical Christians, Masculinity and Gay Sexuality,” in *Contemporary Christianity and LGBT Sexualities*, 2009, 49; Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 13.

¹¹¹ Bridges and Pascoe, “On the Elasticity of Gender Hegemony,” 254.

family system. Until we understand the stories we've inherited, we can never truly hope to be effective agents of redemption. But with patience and perseverance and a willingness to do the work, we can break free from these patterns and we can create new, healthier stories for ourselves.

The connection was felt. Rico, a participant who shared he had grown up without his father framed this pursuit of redemption in terms of “love” targeted at breaking his family “curses” in his family system with intentionality: first, in his marriage and fatherhood.

The *Myth Quest* discourse around examining these masculine roles demonstrates significant innovation in Christian gender relations in the way it continues to communicate and embody a comfortability for flexible masculinity performance — especially realized in the participants’ foundational inner work on the cultivation of virtues that challenge gender traditionalism in areas of Christian local society. *Myth Quest’s* redemptive Christian masculinity finds its expression of maleness in the adoption and actualization of spiritual and moral attributes chiefly modeled in the example of Christ that circumvents the “cultural” (i.e., hegemonic) expression of masculinity that mobilized men through large stadium conferences in sports arenas among the Promise Keepers, for example. The list of virtues that Tyler includes in critical mindset shifts (“judgment to grace”) and among lifestyle principles (“Play”, “Take Nothing Personally”, “Surrender to the Adventure”, “Start with the Heart”) correspond to moral virtues and imperatives that did not typically appear in American evangelical masculinities, such as “grace”, “empathy”, “openness”, “play,” among others. The participants’ transformation of masculinity was outlined according to these values and roles in their Christian marriages, parenting and positions as business leaders and caretakers, which were seen as naturally encompassing contextual imperatives to initiate romance with one’s spouse or empathetic parenting and playful investment in one’s children. These untraditionally-masculine virtues and roles link *Myth Quest’s* core conceptualization of transformed masculinity to anti-hegemonic partnerships and caretaking family roles with female others in a way that other Christian/evangelical masculinity discourses have left hegemonic masculinity unchallenged, “upholding patriarchal concepts but redefining them.”¹¹²

Met opmerkingen [MC1]: very good, how does it differ from Brusco?

¹¹² Klinken, *Transforming Masculinities in African Christianity*, 171.

'Integrated' Male Spouses and Leaders in Myth Quest

"Integration" was regularly attributed to the hybrid masculinity performance many *Myth Quest* participants desired to develop or strengthen through the journey to adopt the course's redemptive Christian masculinity: an unapologetically-male *and* "integrated" gender performance that fully exercised emotional, mental and spiritual health as husbands, fathers and leaders while encouraging internal and external flourishing within their "spheres of influence." Contrasting to the evangelical appeal to "asceticism" and an "aggressive focus on the family" in transformed masculinity, *Myth Quest's* spiritual masculinity again appeals to men's agency in family systems and gendered structures, which facilitates integrated marriages and families where Christian men express masculinity through mutuality and "joy."¹¹³ This "integration" occurs upon this religious reformation of hybrid masculinity in comparison to evangelical masculinity: *Myth Quest* masculinity discourse maintains orthodox gender "essentialism" while challenging any spiritual and pragmatic "immutability" of Christian gender roles.¹¹⁴

Building upon its vehicle of male agency for masculinity transformation, the "redemption" of participants' life stories, family histories, and the relationships and structures within their reach is consistently framed as a collaborative process that includes spouses, trusted friends and mature mentors who have special insight into one's history and personality with intimate access. As Tyler framed it in one of the course video reviewing *"The Quest,"* "Finding your calling isn't just about you and what you want. It's also about how your choices impact those you love." Long-term goals and decisions prompted by one's inner work and personal growth (e.g., a career shift, a large investment, or a move across country, or a significant change to one's weekly routine) must consider their "crew": this close circle of others *with the participants* as they embark on their hero's journey. For an example of shadow masculinity in this area, Tyler recommends the participants examine *Moby Dick*: "Captain Ahab damns his entire crew based on this relentless, obsessive pursuit that they don't really have any stake in at all. [...] Even the best navigators have to course correct a lot of times." This encourages participants in the course to "check their ego" and approach agency and redemptive action with "humility" and "a willingness to listen and learn

¹¹³ Brusco, *The Reformation of Machismo*, 5; Anderson et al., *Studying Global Pentecostalism*, 76.

¹¹⁴ Bartkowski, "Breaking Walls, Raising Fences," 38

from others” — notably including female partners and advisors. At the same time, this is encompassed by redemptive Christian masculinity’s valuation of the individual agent that ensures “humility” does not lead to the ascetic ideals exhibited in the ‘domestication of man’ observed by other researchers.¹¹⁵

Past observations on the evangelical men’s movement emphasize how *Myth Quest’s* format contribute to the novel negotiation of exclusive-male participation in its programming. The masculinity projects of U.S. evangelicalism reviewed in this study reflect exclusively male, in-person spaces for participation, even among projects where Christian men were found to initiate or make inference to negotiating gender norms. *Myth Quest*, on the other hand, accepts gendered interference in its exclusively-male program. Some participants would join the weekly Discord calls watching over their four young children before bedtime, swaddling their newborn to give their wives space to rest or handle other individual tasks, or riding home in the car with their teenage daughter at the end of the day. With family members in the background, vulnerable anecdotes and admission of distress, dissatisfaction and doubt that described the men’s own personal mental, emotional and spiritual flourishing were not withheld.

The participants’ chosen roles and expressed acceptance of egalitarian marriages and sharing of caretaking roles uncover a transformation of masculinities that affords further development in gender relations and in religious gender identity. Whereas Brusco found evangelical transformation of masculinities to facilitate a ‘domestication of man’ that prioritizes “female interests” in Christian men’s reformation — goals aligned with contextual ideals rooted in “family well-being” — *Myth Quest’s* activities balance individual agency and responsibility to others that validates both masculine and feminine interests in the assertion of mutual gender relations and shared flourishing.¹¹⁶ The agentive nature of redemptive Christian masculinity integrates and via. “flourishing” consequently promotes the agency of gendered others in marriage and the family in a manner that does not redefine or reproduce “patriarchal models of the family” — or further, patriarchal Christian male identity — that remained in evangelical cases such as in Hansen and Klinken.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Brusco, *The Reformation of Machismo*, 5.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 6, 11.

¹¹⁷ Hansen, *Addicted to Christ*, 19.

In the early stages of the course, Tyler’s recorded course instruction included invitations to ask for and implement their spouse’s input in the processes to clarify one’s identity (strengths, weaknesses, evident passions) and define one’s Quest for the remainder of the program. “Where am I listening to fear rather than faith?” Tyler prompted the group: “Take some time to journal and think about this stuff. Talk about it with your spouse, or your friends, or your family. This is the type of work that, if you actually do, will allow you to get the most out of this program, so I encourage you to really take the time to do them.” Tyler himself shared that the principles and archetypes he drafted for *Myth Quest* were just as appropriately applicable to spiritual growth and leadership development for women: the participants agreed, and they independently offered up examples of change their wives and family members had noted or helped the men realized throughout the twelve weeks. This collaborative culture promoted by the course and cohort thus significantly frames *Myth Quest*’s transformation of masculinity as the *contextualization* of its essential principles and teachings rather than an exclusively-gendered vision for ‘redemptive’ morality, wellbeing and leadership. This casual acceptance and intentional promotion of gender inclusivity in *Myth Quest*’s transformation of masculinities is critical to conceptualizing its core gender ideology, ultimately rewarding the participants both spiritually and practically in their course work oriented toward a genderless ideal for communal flourishing that is incompatible with ideologies like ‘militant masculinity’ and its promotion of “a properly ordered, patriarchal home” and “a sweet, submissive femininity.”¹¹⁸

In a demonstration of this tangible transformation, Brent, the participant who welcomed his first newborn son with his wife during the course, confessed in one weekly call that *Myth Quest* provided him the resources and a timely opportunity to prioritize mutuality with his wife more than before. When updating the cohort on his progress in defining and taking steps on his quest, Brent opened up about how this big development has prompted growth in the way he shares goal-setting and family responsibilities in his marriage:

BRENT: Part of my quest — well, my quest, not part of it — my quest is to try to figure out what normal looks like for us. We just had a baby five weeks ago. [...] Yesterday, I was noticing that I was starting to kind of get panicked that I wasn’t in control of things or just like the whole man, like [...] we’re not at the spot where we should be right now. [...]

¹¹⁸ Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 11–12.

And I realized like this is stuff that my dad would have done, not in control, trying to do it by himself. Like, *it shouldn't just be me trying to figure out new normal. It should be my wife and I trying to figure out our new normal.* So, I actually apologized to her a little earlier. I said, 'Hey, I'm trying to do this by myself. And I just kind of realized I haven't really invited you into that process with me.' She said, "I know I forgive you. I was just kind of waiting for you to!" **Brent laughs**

TYLER: That's a good woman!

SHANE: That *is* a good woman! Come on!

BRENT: I got a good one, man. So, I said, 'you're right.' [...] If I hadn't been doing this, I probably would have just. I probably would have kept going. I probably would have reverted back into some sort of lone wolf. Like I can do it. I'm going to do 100% of everything. "You want some help?" 'Nope. I'm good. I need to figure this out because I know exactly what needs to happen and you can't help me and...' things like that. So I think not just this week but all the weeks, I do something, I notice, 'Ooh,' that's actually concentrating where I'm trying to go. And then I can start to see that more and more.

As demonstrated in Brent's experience, the agentive masculine identity allowed by *Myth Quest's* redemptive Christian masculinity avoids reifying gender hegemony while simultaneously achieves balance — "integration" — in common masculine roles that evangelical gender projects have often carried to "aggressive" or "ascetic" extremes.¹¹⁹ By its reaffirmation of essential masculine identity within systems of mutual "flourishing," *Myth Quest's* integrated gender ideology inherently connects transformed masculinities with egalitarian gender relations, overcoming the shortcomings of past Christian men's programs and their precedent for otherwise ruling in favor of a "patriarchal bargain" in Christian local society institutions.

8. National "Agents of Redemption?": Reevaluating Christian Masculinity

Transformation's Potential for Social Repair in the Civil Sphere

Promoting a "redemptive" Christian masculinity performance that integrates social virtues and improved gender relations in its transformation of masculinities, *Myth Quest* is not shy about casting a vision for affecting change in wider American society, even though social change is not envisioned in the same way as in feminist discourse or in social justice activism — much like

¹¹⁹ McDowell, "Aggressive and Loving Men," 232.

Christian men’s ministries before it. Rooted in its participants’ goals for personal growth and transformation, the pilot program frames notions of social change around individuals’ unique “legacy” in society, whether local or far-reaching. As Tyler explained in a course video:

TYLER: It's our default position to put ourselves in the role of the main character, and it's hard to see ourselves through the lens of another person's perspective where we actually might be a supporting role, or we might be a recurring character in that story. The challenge of this journey is to take yourself off of that throne and to see yourself in the role of a vital but small part of a story that is unfolding throughout human history. [...] If instead we focus ourselves on the legacy that we're leaving to those that come behind us, the positive impact that we're having on the world, we'll actually find ourselves in a place of a lot greater enjoyment and bigger impact, which will leave us more fulfilled and actually end up being a better story.

Within *Myth Quest*'s context as a faith-based venture into personal development courses, this vision of “legacy” is feasible for its initial participant demographic, predominately middle-class, white, well-educated professionals, from differing geographic and family histories — many of whom are actively pursuing creative or caring professions that exert “positive impact” with day-to-day vocational variety. The Christian significance of this vision is even more expansive:

TYLER: 'What can I do with my life that will make things better for the generations that come after me?' And if you're a follower of Christ? This is not just about the generations that come after you. You're actually a part of an eternal story that is about redemption. It's a story that is about bringing heaven to earth now. It's about bringing the eternal to the temporal, and you get to play a role in that story.

Myth Quest's spiritualization of generational impact was not always so integral to its own mission in transforming masculinities. As a lifelong American Christian brought up by parents who dedicated their careers to a Reformed Calvinist church on the U.S. West Coast, Tyler characterized exclusively-Christian identification as a “barricade” to faith-based cultural engagement with “people that don't know Jesus and probably actively dislike Christians.” Ultimately, Tyler determined the personal value to him for God, “the center of reality and truth and goodness and beauty,” was inseparable from the core values that lead his inclusive goals for *Myth Quest* and its outreach; where the course participants accepted this faith-based integration, they also

emphasized the importance of including those others “across the spectrum,” positing other interpretations of “an eternal story [...] about redemption.”

Participants like Trey and Ryan leading other North-American Christian ventures and projects unaffiliated to evangelical or partisan networks demonstrate how religious agents in faith-based civil society have successfully shed the vision of exclusively-Christian public spheres that accompanied the U.S. evangelical men’s movement in contemporary cultural engagement. This inclusive attitude towards authentic Christian sociocultural influence circumvents the absolute “privatization of religion” and “its retreat into the domestic sphere of family and the home” that drew Brewer to theorize the potential for well-positioned faith-based organizations, like the churches of Northern Ireland, to realize sustainable social repair in the civil sphere, even facing down antagonistic and militant religious blocs.¹²⁰ In its vision for redemptive Christian masculinity, this novel Christian ethos still unapologetically follows the individual agent as “sovereign” in the spiritual transformation of masculinity, all the way down; however, these equipped “effective agents of redemption” are guided to identify extensive “spheres of influence” that permit structural issues as possible goals for redemptive impact, including the communal hope for social repair, “reconciliation between erstwhile protagonists, social-relationship building and repair across the communal divide, and the replacement of brokenness by the development (or restoration) of people’s feelings of wholeness.”¹²¹

Defining Social Change in Myth Quest Redemptive Christian Masculinity

At its core, *Myth Quest* characterizes “the redemptive hero” as one enacting change “in the example of Christ, who laid himself down for his enemies.” Conceiving of everyday conflict within both micro- and macro-politics, Tyler describes the ideal religious “agent” as a peacemaker, one who embodies “the redemptive power that is possible when we refuse to allow our enemies to stay our enemies” through “wisdom,” “careful attention,” and “different strategies at different times.” Outlining peacemaking within broader “leadership skills,” *Myth Quest’s* ethical nuance to social-justice activism best suits its individual-centric approach to transformation and its U.S.

¹²⁰ Brewer, Higgins, and Teeney, *Religion, Civil Society, and Peace in Northern Ireland*, 11.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

Christian heritage, but *Myth Quest* explicitly labels service to marginal communities and justice work as valid application of redemptive Christian masculinity. Tyler makes this perspective hard to ignore, arguing that the calling of the redemptive hero should include “the issue that you keep coming back to, the one that you just can't get out of your mind [such as] the kids that are growing up at homes that are unstable”: the first issue you imagine “when you think about the world being broken.”

The *Myth Quest* framework calls for a passionate and anti-passive embrace of this outlook within culture and society: an outlook that prompts participants to pursue social change that fits into their personal change goals, equally including a willingness to courageously confront issues and identities that are difficult to face. In reality, *Myth Quest's* redemptive Christian masculinity simply imagines “fighting for justice in the broader society” alongside “fixing a burst pipe in your crawl space,” “taking a hard look at your own mental health and getting the help you need,” and “the very real issues in your marriage or your relationship with your in-laws.” The cadence of “responsibility [...] to actually partner with God in the redemption *of your own heart and your family and of your workplace and of the world around you*” communicates a lack of specification regarding “responsibility” to resolve structural issues, yet also an altogether rejection of apathy:

TYLER: Without intentional productive redemptive effort, things decay. There's no neutral here. The natural orientation of a fallen world is in the direction of deterioration and hell. So, what do we do about that? Well, obviously, we don't want to contribute to the corruption. I'm sure you know plenty of people who do exactly that. They make the world a little more like hell all the time, and they drag themselves there too. [...] Everything is tilting toward hell, so if we do nothing, things just continue down that path. Our call is to stand in opposition to that corruption, *but not just to stand in opposition to it, but to actively participate in the redemption.* Our commission is to help bring heaven to earth through our own unique calling. That's the adventure of our lives. And I mean this in a universal and spiritual sense every bit as much as I mean it in a practical and local sense. [...] We're called to confront the corruption and redeem the city. And that's difficult. And it requires us to have courage and to get ourselves in order.

Ultimately, *Myth Quest's* theory of change as a person-to-person venture is shaped both spiritually and pragmatically: men can embrace “courage” in their agency as redemptive Christian men by “grace,” embodying that spiritual masculine identity with the support of other redemptive agents. This central idea of spiritually-empowered influence was principled in *Myth Quest* as

“start with the heart”: it well-represents the inside-out theory of change considers its participants’ impact upon their completion of this course on the (g)local communities they inhabit.

There are various ways that *Myth Quest* manages to facilitate social action through its transformation of masculinities, like the inherent ‘call’ in Tyler’s spiritual affirmation of its participants uniqueness and dignity to warrant the self-evaluation of how one’s unique “gifts” come with “duty,” identifying the agentive onus of vocation:

TYLER: I want to encourage you to think about how you can use your treasures to create a positive impact in your own life and in the lives of those around you, whether it's by improving the way that you show up in your relationships or by contributing positively to your community or even helping others on their own hero journey.

In this refrain, Tyler guides the participants to principally identify *personal* identities or persons to “show up” for more than *social* identities or persons, discursively placing those who are disadvantaged or already at a distance out of the range of immediacy. However, this exhortation to maintain reflection and discernment facilitates “positive impact” inevitably incorporates one’s consideration of their social positioning, factoring into the course’s final stage on “leadership skills” shared with these men to apply in their transformed masculine roles in community. Further, the combination of the cultural and religious context that *Myth Quest* inhabits and its agency-focused masculinity performance present a predictably-effective environment for gendered religious actors to take up sociopolitical leadership and activism through the incorporation of Christ-like virtues and its inclusive social imagination — a development hoped for by Mahmood in her conceptualization of gendered religious activity in the public sphere.¹²²

Achieving Social Repair in Myth Quest’s Transformation of Masculinities

Though advocating for a very spiritualized form of social change, *Myth Quest’s* approach to “redemptive” personal transformation yielding communal impact outlines a framework for American Christian men to utilize their positions of influence to initiate authentic and consistent activities that demonstrate sustainable potential for addressing structural issues and affecting

¹²² Mahmood, “Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent,” 222–23.

social repair. This potential rests precisely within the course's discourse for transformation and builds upon evangelical approaches to cultural engagement and activism in several positive ways.

Heath's research on the identity formation of men in the Promise Keepers tested the evangelical men's movement's potential for social change through individual agency and the transformation of U.S. Christian masculinities, unearthing the driving force of collective evangelical identity in defining all of the above. She found a substituted collective 'PK' identity formed around challenged and negotiated notions of hegemonic masculinity within its evangelical heritage: in its discourse of transforming masculinities, this approach to social change in gender relations overlooked social privilege and structural inequality while prioritizing individual empowerment and transformation of male roles in Christian local.¹²³ Heath ultimately argued that any improvement in gender relations was "made possible by ignoring the structural conditions that empower men and provide payoffs based on claims to manhood," based on her comparative observations on the heavily-nuanced use of gender and racial equality rhetoric (from adjacent U.S. social movements).¹²⁴ In the evangelical men's movement, the most positive evaluations of "overcoming social hierarchies" featured individual PK men positing inclusive behaviors pledged in their local PK accountability groups — though enabled by the discursive "dividing practices" leading an alternative narrative of holy '*differánce*.'¹²⁵ Neither evangelical case addressing specific structural privileges and issues, researchers determined at the time that lasting social change remained out of reach, finding that "In terms of transforming contemporary culture for Christ, then, the rhetoric of male headship appears to be a fairly ineffective tool" — especially with regard to reforming gender relations.¹²⁶

Taking Du Mez's mapping of the Promise Keepers in-group politics and partisan telos into consideration, *Myth Quest's* contemporary placement in U.S. society and in cultural and political discourses posits some notable innovations with which to optimize its creative capacities and inclusive outreach. Currently, *Myth Quest's* utilization of free and accessible platforms separate from institutional religious spaces and binding civil sphere associations pinpoints the

¹²³ Heath, "Soft-Boiled Masculinity," 441.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Bartkowski, "Breaking Walls, Raising Fences," 40, 44.

¹²⁶ Gallagher and Smith, "Symbolic Traditionalism and Pragmatic Egalitarianism," 229.

authoritative borderlands that Hansen and Gao demonstrate are novel public areas within which to transform masculinities and influence cultural and moral discourses.¹²⁷ The effect of the promotion of a spiritual and moral masculinity performance that embraced out-group members and accessed marginal identities highlights the utility of accessible and ‘integrating’ masculinities such as *Myth Quest*’s that intentionally prioritize one’s instantaneous “legacy” and effect on their present community. Further, Gao’s examination of how Chinese Protestant men enacted religious masculinities “as a cultural strategy that men use to negotiate the social-cultural environment around them” uniquely compares *Myth Quest*’s promotion of masculine agency which consistently prompts participants *to influence the socio-cultural environment around them as “agents of redemption”* — in practical and relational ways.

Already, Tyler once utilized the *Myth Quest* platform to embed this redemptive angle in addressing systemic violence in the United States calling his first participant cohort to orient redemptive Christian masculinity towards tangible and daunting public issues, like a tragic mass shooting that took place at an elementary school adjacent to his home community during the twelve weeks of the course:

TYLER: The families who lost their kids and their mom and their dad - those families paid for the funeral of the shooter. And that’s something that’s not ... I’ve not seen the media report on that, but that’s the story that we’re after, right? Like that’s the story of Jesus. It’s like, “Bless those that persecute you,” and that’s the extreme, right? [...] And I think that that’s the spirit that we’ve lost in our society and it’s one that I want to see a revival of. [...] I think the more that we can start to have those conversations and keep moving forward, and then not just talking about it on Twitter but actually acting that out in our own spheres. *And so, we’ve all been talking about, “What is that?” We’ve all been kind of talking about that in terms of our parents. And that’s a great place to start, right?* [...] If we can — if everybody on planet Earth was to approach their life with that mindset, the mindset of extending grace and bringing compassion and bringing the virtues like from *here* out, and then starting with the people that we actually interact with — the world would be a completely different place. [...] There’s no story of redemption unless you participate in that.

Within their positions of influence, *Myth Quest* men can define masculine identities, family systems, workplace environments and religious spaces (such as in Gao’s case study) that promote anti-patriarchal structures and leverage personal impact to establish a redemptive imagination

¹²⁷ Gao, Woods, and Cai, “The Influence of Masculinity,” 10–11; Hansen, *Addicted to Christ*, 7, 12.

that *balances the structural with the personal and communal*. Religiously, in light of scholars' claim of the "problems of spiritual and intellectual authority" within U.S. evangelicalism itself, *Myth Quest's* desire to strengthen social and spiritual institutions shaped around such narratives and networks that hold space for tension and increased pluralism — even through masculinity transformation— implies a decisive counteraction to the "polarizing" and damaging ideologies, like militant masculinity, that reinforce in-group dissent on local and national levels.¹²⁸

9. Conclusion

This study has aimed to answer the research question, ***'How do American Christian pilot programs focused on the construction of masculinities reveal religious discourses on men and masculinities that differ from the historic evangelical men's movement in the United States?'*** supported by the sub-questions, *'How do the theologies of these programs compare to dominant evangelical theology and belief?'* and *'How do these pilot programs ascribe 'social virtues' (such as empathy, egalitarianism, etc.) to a transformed Christian masculinity?'* Through the course of this research, the pilot program of *Myth Quest* revealed the production of a religious masculinity discourse that promoted a masculinity performance for personal growth articulated according to confessional Christianity, including virtues such as "empathy," "humility," "grace," and "beauty," that extends into local and social spheres of influence by the intentional embodiment of the masculine agent's spiritual identity, separated from social and cultural identifiers and 'ascetic' and 'aggressive' masculine roles highlighted in evangelical transformations of masculinity. The male participants of *Myth Quest* demonstrate truly novel religious negotiations of hegemonic and hybrid masculinities in their embodied life as non-institutional religious space for male gathering and growth and even more so in their unapologetically Christian-and-male approach to gender relations as exhibited in their discourses of Christian marriage and family. The movement initiated by *Myth Quest* lays the groundwork to expand these novel approaches to Christian identity politics and religious masculinity to other social identities and social locations inhabiting the fringe of religious space in faith-based civil society, yet this possibility for coordinated national

¹²⁸ Worthen, *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism*, 4; Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 7.

social repair may not be realized through *Myth Quest's* activities — unless exclusively through the coordinated social repair activities of its individual masculine agents (as conceptualized in this first iteration of the masculinity course).

Maintaining the critical contributions of the fields of evangelical studies, gender studies, and the field of men, masculinities and religion within the scope of this study, these research findings warrant further application of hegemonic and hybrid masculinities and highly-constructivist religious ideologies and identities like 'militant masculinity' and U.S. 'evangelicals' in further research on the religious capabilities for social repair and other cultural/religious peacebuilding goals. The ambitious scope of this particular study is a limitation in itself upon the ability of the research to effectively interrogate each of these conceptual frameworks comprehensively, yet the corroborative data of multidisciplinary fields featured in the literature on these topics highlight historical and theological networks that, I maintain, are increasingly salient to investigations of societal ideologies for conflict, community and belonging — especially in the U.S. context of civil religion, politics and social ethics and virtues. The data collected on the novel gender performance and relations exhibited by these American Christian men within a novel space for community outside of a traditional religious institution strongly emphasizes the need to continue in research on these religious actors' gender ideologies and attitudes that have drastically shifted since the years of observations upon the U.S. evangelical men's movement, the most-recent final large-scale mobilization of Christian masculine actors in the public sphere.

Altogether, the redemptive Christian masculinity of *Myth Quest* posits a challenge to several intractable ideologies embodied by religious communities navigating pluralism and societal privilege around the globe. It also posits a redemptive, hopeful response to theorists' hope for the strengthening of "alternative masculinity models [...] elevating gentleness and self-control, a commitment to peace, and a divestment of power as expressions of authentic Christian manhood," from positions of influence that posit possible futures for individual and social "transformation" and repair in various local and global spheres: intractable exclusionary ideologies effectively "undone."¹²⁹

¹²⁹ Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 304.

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