

YMCA Spiritual Legacy Series

Luther Gulick – Promoter of Athletics to Build Faith



Dr. Luther Gulick

Gulick, whose parents were missionaries, was born in Honolulu, Hawaii in 1865. For fifteen years he traveled extensively because of his background as a child of missionaries. Finally, in 1880, he was able to slow his travels and go to Oberlin College until 1884.. In the fall of 1885, Gulick

entered a middle preparatory class, but also took some college classes to further his education. Shortly after his stay at Oberlin, he went to Sargent School of Physical Training in Cambridge, Massachusetts for a period of six months. In April of 1886, he became the physical director of the YMCA in Jackson, Michigan. and continued his relationship with the YMCA off and on until his death

In 1887, Gulick became head of the gymnasium department of the Young Men’s Christian Education’s Springfield Training School. In 1891, he assigned one of his students a set of rules to design a game around. The student was James Naismith. The game became known as basketball. Gulick’s other achievements include: Chairman, AAU Basket Ball Committee (1895-1905), Member, Olympic Games Committee (1906-Athens, 1908-London), Founded Public School Athletic League (PSAL) as head of physical education for Public Schools of New York City (1903), Instrumental in creation of the Boy Scouts, and along with his wife, introduced the Camp Fire Girls to educate women on changing roles outside the home (1911).

Dr. Gulick was perhaps the most influential figure within the YMCA (Putney). Gulick campaigned to “. . . Christianize the gym” (Putney: 71) and in turn reinforced the growing relationship between sport and Christianity.

A “New” Othodoxy?

This, however is not to suggest that Gulick was thoroughly orthodox his beliefs. According to John Gustav-Wrathall:

“Gulick appeared to embrace many contradictions... He was an advocate of eugenics and a believer in social Darwinism who also upheld altruism, service, and self sacrifice as the highest form of religion” (Gustav-Wrathall, 1998: 28-20).”

The foundation of his thought was the so-called 'Recapitulation Theory'. According to Recapitulation Theory, each individual, just like each human race (and that included at the time what we now would refer to as ethnic groups), recapitulates human evolution. Child study experts, such as G. Stanley Hall, president of Clark University and founding father of psychology in the United States, for example argued that each boy had a “little Indian” stage in his development. That is, on the way towards maturity each individual relives past stages of evolution. It was central, then, to shape behavior towards civilized self-possession as each individual moves away from the more atavistic behavioral stages of human evolution. Luther Gulick believed that this could be achieved best through proper training and development of

spirit, mind, and body and to overcome the mind-body dualism in social thought and to understand human beings as holistic entities instead. This brought Gulick to create a new symbol for the YMCA - a triangle, inscribed with the words 'body,' 'mind,' and 'spirit,' adopted as YMCA logo in 1895 at the YMCA Convention in Springfield, Massachusetts. Gulick, then, promoted what was known at the time as a “Muscular Christianity.”



“Athleticising the YMCA”

When he and Robert J. Roberts launched the first course for gymnasium instructors at the YMCA College at Springfield, the association did not see physical training as the integral part of its program, and of an education of its members to be well-rounded men, but merely as a bait to draw young men to what the YMCA considered its main mission - religious work. There was fear of “the tale wagging the dog”.

For proponents of “Muscular Christianity, the philosophy of the triangle principle (body, mind and spirit) found its Biblical roots in Luke 2:52 (KJV): “And Jesus increased in wisdom (mind) and stature (body), and in favour with God (spirit) and man (society).” Other frequently cited verses that legitimate physical education were 1 Cor 6:19 (KJV): “ know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost” and Mark 12:30 (KJV): “And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind”.

Theological Shift

In all levels, the Red Triangle widely replaced the official emblem of the World’s Alliance, during World War I. The “Chi Rho” cross in the center was explained by the International Committee: “In the circle the monogram of Christ, as the faith of the ancient Christians



Painted it everywhere in their catacombs, will remind our Associations that Christ is their centre, their true bond of Union, their supreme end, their strength, and their only 'raison d'être'”. Thus, while the emblem of the World’s Alliance arose from Evangelical missiology, the Red Triangle arose from the anthropology of the movement.

Editorial Comment: Our understanding of the mission of the YMCA is determined by how we answer three questions: 1) what was the mission of Christ? 2) What is humankind’s greatest need? and 3) what is “salvation”? Truly our theology determines our activity.

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