

The Welfare Warfare

How the Y. M. C. A. Got in Wrong and, by its Sectarianism, Invited Cutthroat Competition in Benevolence



By Alexander Woolcott

NOW that it is all over and the millions have nearly all been spent that were given by the homefolks for the coddling of their troops abroad, there are many who would like to know just what was the matter with the Y. M. C. A. anyway and just why it was necessary to turn five rival welfare societies loose on a defenceless and preoccupied army in the field.

Why didn't we have five quartermaster departments, each trying to equip and feed the troops in its own way, with a special one to nourish and adorn the Jewish soldiers, another for the Catholic soldiers, another for the orthodox Protestants and so on? To be sure, this would have cost a lot more money: it would have caused a sickening waste of time and goods and labor. It would have sent many troops naked and hungry into battle and pushed forward others who were wheezy from overeating and exhausted under the strain of carrying four extra overcoats. Indeed, it would have been preposterous, but not a bit more preposterous than was the cutthroat competition in benevolence which started when the Y. M. C. A., the Knights of Columbus, the Jewish Welfare Board, the Salvation Army and the American Library Association all got going at once in the A. E. F.

There were, of course, more than five auxiliaries. There was the Red Cross, the Y. W. C. A. and the War Camp Community Service, but for one reason or another none of these can be regarded as combatants in the welfare warfare. The Red Cross had a place apart, a Congressionally authorized, permanent adjunct of the war-making forces, set up not as administrator of the leisure of the troops but rather as special guardian of every wounded, sick, cold or hungry Yank it could reach. The Y. W. C. A. was considered merely as a specializing subdivision of the Y. M. C. A. The War

Camp Community Service did not enter into the competition which harrassed the A. E. F., for all its work was done on this side of the Atlantic.

There was, it is true, an effort to make the welfare workers cooperate intelligently, to make them avoid duplication of work, to make them care more about the well-being of John W. Doughboy and less about their own self-glorified showing in magazine articles at home. But the effort was belated and never really successful. The welfare work, though wonderful and characteristically American in its abundance and enthusiasm, got into a mess very early in the game and never got out of it. Why?

The trouble goes back to the original choice of the Y. M. C. A. as the soldier's friend—a choice made in the inevitable scramble which launched the A. E. F., a choice made by the War Department in haste and repented—bitterly repented—at leisure.

When General Pershing was ordered overseas, it seemed wise to entrust to some auxiliary organization the extra comfort and recreation of the troops, to transfer to some outside and unhampered camp-follower the care of the Army's leisure time, which, in an expedition three thousand miles from home, was clearly to be of first-rate importance. So the people were asked to give a hundred millions to start the thing off and the Young Men's Christian Association was designated as the recipient and administrator of that fund.

Why was the Y. M. C. A. chosen? Well, it had the advantage of being already in existence, which was more than could be said of most of our war material. Then, as far as official reports went, it was in good repute for similar work with the British Army. Besides, it had done good work on a small scale on the Mexican border. Furthermore, to the outward eye, it seemed about as free and open and general as the public school system, a disinterested organization chiefly concerned with the health and recreation of American youth. To many, the Y. M. C. A. seemed synonymous with gymnasium. So why not?

But when the War Department turned the job over to the Y. M. C. A., it did not know—and probably the vast majority of those who put up the money did not know—that the Y. M. C. A. was primarily a religious association and, furthermore one rigidly controlled by certain sects of the Protestant church.

It soon became apparent, however, that this was so. It soon became apparent that the Y. M. C. A., while consenting reluctantly to administer the canteens, was also hotly determined to preach to the boys. Reports from the camps, both here and overseas, told of prayer meetings camouflaged as movie-shows, of antediluvian tracts circulated, of resistance to Sunday baseball,

of reluctance to allow smoking in the huts, of reading-rooms inundated with proselytizing church magazines well calculated to enrage such Catholics, Christian Scientists and other unrepresented persuasions as might chance on them.

Reports also led to the suspicion that the Y. M. C. A., embarrassed by the fact that it had to recruit where the government could draft, by the fact that the pick of American manhood was already in the service and by the fact that the flower of the young ministry seemed to prefer the chaplaincies, was sending overseas a personnel in which ministers of the less virile and less vital type were overprominent.

Faced with this situation, the Catholics went to the War Department and said that, in all justice to themselves, they should have to ask for a voice in the war council of the Y. M. C. A. This seemed fair enough, but the War Department proposal to that effect ran into a stone wall. The stone wall was made up of ancient and immutable laws of the Y. M. C. A.—notably the Portland resolution of 1869—which bar from any voice in its government all those not members of the evangelical churches.

At Portland, Maine, in 1869, the International Convention of Young Men's Christian Associations adopted the following:

Resolved, That, as these organizations bear the name of Christian, and profess to be engaged directly in the Savior's service, so it is clearly their duty to maintain the control and management of all their affairs in the hands of those who profess to love and publicly avow their faith in Jesus, the Redeemer, as Divine and who testify their faith by becoming and remaining members of churches held to be Evangelical. And we hold these churches to be Evangelical which, maintaining the Holy Scriptures to be the only infallible rule of faith and practice, do believe in the Lord Jesus Christ (the only begotten of the father, King of Kings, and Lord of Lords, in whom dwell the fulness of the Godhead bodily, and who was made sin for us, though knowing no sin, bearing our sins in his own body on the tree) as the only name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved from everlasting punishment.

(To this clause, the International Convention in Indianapolis added in 1893 the phrase "and to life eternal.")

Resolved, That the Associations organized after this date shall be entitled to representation in future Conferences of the Associated Young Men's Christian Associations of North America, upon condition that they be severally composed of young men in communion with Evangelical churches (provided that in places where Associations are formed by a single denomination, members of other denominations are

not excluded therefrom), and active membership and the right to hold office be conferred only upon young men who are members in good standing of Evangelical Churches.

Unitarians, Christian Scientists, and many smaller denominations were then barred. And the Catholics.

“**WE** are sorry,” said the Catholics in effect and in chorus, “but in that event the War Department can do no less than sanction an auxiliary society of our own.”

And the War Department, however reluctantly and with whatever misgivings, agreed. On the basis of the meagre statistics available, it had ordained that 37 percent of the chaplains should be priests of the Church of Rome. So why not a Y. M. C. A. that should mean Young Men’s Catholic Association? So the Knights of Columbus was groomed for the task.

There then arose a situation not unlike that which enlivened a certain armory where a largely Hibernian detachment of the National Guard was being made ready for service. Ham having been served on a Friday by the cooks, there arose a hubub of protest from all the Catholics in the ranks who said that though hungry, they could not and would not eat meat on a Friday. It was necessary for an emissary from the nearest cathedral to hurry to the armory before the meal could proceed. He assured them that a special dispensation released the faithful in the service from their usual abstinence and that it was therefore quite all right for them to eat the ham. At this announcement, there was a murmur of general satisfaction, marred only by the shrill and troubled protest of Private Ikey Finkelstein.

“But what about me?”

Yes, what about us? That was the chorus which assailed the ears of the War Department as soon as the Knights of Columbus received their orders for duty overseas. The Jewish Welfare Board was immediately created to meet the emergency. That left still unrepresented, and still injured, the Unitarians, the Christian Scientists and many a smaller denomination. It left unreconciled many a secret society, for the admission of the Knights of Columbus, which is a secret society, fired many—the Masons and another with like ambition. However, with the American Library Association necessary because of its special work and with the Salvation Army which, starting from England, had slipped in unannounced by the back door when the War Department wasn’t looking, already in the field, the War Department shut down stubbornly on all further applicants. This decision was not reached until after many a stormy, all-night session in sweltering Washington. But the War Department was already painfully embarrassed by a competition

in benevolence which it had been helpless to prevent and most of which had arisen directly from the sectarianism of the Y. M. C. A.

The Y. M. C. A. activities created the impression abroad and at home that the social work was a mere veneer for zealous but misplaced religious propaganda. The character of a large proportion of its personnel served to strengthen this suspicion which has not since abated merely because the audit shows that only a little more than two percent. was spent for religious work. It is true, of course, that many of our little brothers of the red triangle, though homely, kindly, human beings, were about as Christian as the Sultan of Turkey? But these sneaked in. A large number of the secretaries were either ministers or ministerially minded—a too large number.

The very recruiting blanks, in enumerating the qualifications required of a secretary, named deep religious feeling as the first requisite and common sense as the thirteenth—and, indeed, harsh critics swore that the work of the Y. M. C. A. was conducted in about that proportion. Those blanks were even used as tests for heathenish actors who merely wanted to go out and give of their talents to amuse the boys. Of course they enlisted many splendid men, but they also repelled many a virile, sociable, whimsical man who would have given the moon for a chance to serve. They brought over to France and placed in posts requiring tremendous business ability men who, while admirable in character and pious in thought, had no business ability whatever.

In this connection I am reminded of a member of the legal department of the Y. M. C. A. It seemed he had been investigating the contracts for the purchase of a certain commodity from four large French factories—a purchase whose deliveries had been going on for four months under the genial supervision of a clergyman. The lawyer asked what check the clergymen had been taking to see that the deliveries were according to specifications. The clergyman replied with crushing hauteur that he hoped he had too great a concern for Franco-American friendliness to question the honesty of French factory-owners. So the lawyer made his own check and found every single article under weight. It was at this point that he began to froth.

The Y. M. C. A.'s own literature can be quoted liberally to sustain the argument that it was primarily a religious approach to the Army. Consider, for example, the evidence contained under the heading: "The Fundamental Objective" in the "Manual of Camp Work," a volume issued by the Y. M. C. A. in June, 1918—the month of Château-Thierry—for the use of secretaries with the troops at home and abroad. The passage reads:

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What is the fundamental purpose of Army and Navy work as conducted by the Young Men's Christian Association? How will this purpose be fulfilled? . . . It may be said that the simple and yet comprehensive objective of Young Men's Christian Association service is the making of symmetrical and serviceable Christian character. . . . Sin is a horrible and ever present fact, and nothing less than the grace and power of God will keep men true. Fathers and mothers, the Church and many of these men themselves will expect us to help them find God and win moral victories through His Grace.

Any secretary who does not feel these things deeply is incompetent as a religious leader, whatever other qualifications he may have. Each secretary should be willing to become responsible for a religious program or, for some part of it. That he may have a Christian motive and be inspired by sympathy for needy men is important but not sufficient. The final test of his efficiency is how largely he is able to lead men, one by one, through his influence, through Bible classes and meetings as well as through the participation of the individual in service for others, to accept and follow Jesus Christ. His crowning service for any man is to lead him to allegiance to Jesus Christ and enlist him in unselfish service for his fellows.

IT would be interesting to know how many of those who gave to the Y. M. C. A. funds ever dreamed that this was the "fundamental objective." It would be still more interesting to know how many who did give would have given if they had suspected that this was the fundamental objective. Or if they had suspected that the funds would be administered by men who thought that this was the fundamental objective. At any rate, the mere statement of the case exonerates the War Department from all blame for having immediately let down the bars for the admission of other societies to welfare work.

Of course not all the ministers who went overseas under these instructions there behaved in a manner that would have satisfied the authors of the above-quoted paragraphs. I can never forget two dusty and lousy clergymen on duty as Y. M. C. A. secretaries with an infantry regiment that had emerged for repairs from the Château-Thierry vortex. It was the first Sunday of rest they had had for some time, and they had aspired to a service there in the leafy woods above Bézu-le-Guery. But, on finding the warriors disinclined, they had contented themselves with running a bank to provide change for about eighty crap games then going on in odd corners of the woods.

Of course not all the devout clergymen who went overseas for the Y. M. C. A. betrayed, in their own conduct, the slightest taint of sectarianism. I re-

member one who had been a Baptist missionary to the lepers before he went over with the Marines. I know that a young Jew helped him prepare a church for his most memorable service and that he always carried a pocketful of rosaries for the Catholics in his flock, who were forever losing theirs by wearing them wound in their shoulder-flaps during a battle.

Of course not all the unregenerates among the Y secretaries took seriously the exhortations to piety. Far from it. They may have signed up as having the deepest conceivable religious feeling but, once in France, they went around swearing loudly and conscientiously in an effort, as you might say, to take the curse off the Y. M. C. A.

But it was the Y. M. C. A. tendency to religious work which invited and created all that hopeless duplication in welfare work which encumbered the later days of the A. E. F. There is no use blinking the fact that it was this same tendency which got the Y. M. C. A. in wrong with the troops.

That is not any too clearly understood, and yet an understanding of it is far more important to the Y. M. C. A. itself than to anyone else. Here is an institution which has enormous possibilities for service among the youth of this country here in the home sector. It returns from its biggest undertaking one in which it did an enormous amount of admirable work for which it has received no credit to find its name such a byword that, in order to prevent actors from winning sure laughs by gags at the expense of this popular target, the head of the United Booking office must needs post an order forbidding all vaudeville jokes about the Y. M. C. A. Why? It is important for the Y. M. C. A. to find out and doubly important that it should not take comfort from any of the red herrings that have been drawn across the trail of the investigators.

WHAT have those herrings been? It is true that the Y. M. C. A. got into great and undeserved trouble by the charge of overcharging which arose from its being compelled to administer the Army canteens. It is true that it got into more trouble by yielding to Chaumont's suggestion that it set up officers' clubs as well as huts for enlisted men. It floundered deeper and deeper when, in many places, it allowed local commanders to set aside all front row seats at the movies for officers. It was courting disaster when, in order to raise more and more money, it flooded the home papers and magazines with so much bunk about the wonderful work it was doing that the troops themselves, who knew better, were outraged, and revenged themselves by lavishing praise on the K. of C. and the Salvation Army—particularly the Salvation Army.

What little the Salvation Army undertook to do, it did to perfection, and did it in such a homespun, unpretentious way that it outshone all other welfare agencies in France. But just the same, fully half its great reputation arose from nothing in the world but inarticulate dislike of the Y. M. C. A. So the Salvation Army has been lauded to the skies by many a man who never tasted a doughnut in all his A. E. F. days, just as, with the blurring of memories, it will not be long before every man in the A. E. F. will say and believe that he heard Elsie Janis sing there whereas, of course, the number she actually reached—the number of men any one entertainer could reach—was limited.

ALL these things contributed to the Y. M. C. A.'s unpopularity but those who wish to learn the lesson of its mishap in the war should begin by realizing that none of these was the chief thing. The doughboy, unable to analyze his reaction to the red triangle and loath to speak his mind on some things, has explained, on getting home, that the high prices charged in the canteens constituted his chief grievance. It wasn't that however, for that would have made the Y girls unpopular, which they never were. Besides, the grievance continued long after the Y. M. C. A. had succeeded in unloading the troublesome canteens on the Army. If the doughboy had really spoken his mind, he would have said: "Oh, the Y was all right, I guess. But it didn't have enough hair on its chest."

There was the real reason. It is important to realize that the Y. M. C. A. was full of men spiritually and mentally unfitted for the man's size job of religious leadership and who, nevertheless, undertook that leadership from time to time when service of a quite different sort had been asked and expected of them—expected and paid for.

It might be of no great moment to say so if this had no bearing beyond the character of the Y. M. C. A. in time of war, for it is altogether improbable that America will again employ the Y. M. C. A. in time of war. But it is a matter of considerable moment to the churches from which the Y. M. C. A. derives its sanction. For their own sake, and their own hope of taking hold of the hearts of American youth, it would be well for them to ponder the plight of the Y. M. C. A. and to ask themselves a few questions.

For instance, was the Y. M. C. A. unpopular because too many of its secretaries were spiritually akin to those ministerial unions which, working busily and conscientiously at home, opposed Sunday baseball in the camps, enforced outworn Blue Laws on newly enrolled soldiers, sent the statistics of drunkenness and venereal disease sky high by bringing injunctions to prevent the sale of soda water and the showing of movies

to the troops on Sunday? Why, at one camp—in New Jersey, it was—zealots actually brought injunctions to prevent the playing of crokinole on Sunday. Was the Y. M. C. A. tarred at all with that stick? If so, could it have hoped to make friends with the youth of America?

Was the Y. M. C. A. unpopular because too many of its secretaries were recruited from the pulpit? If so, what is the matter with the pulpit?

Against the unforeseen consequences of the mere sectarianism of the Y. M. C. A., the War Department had to fight steadily. Fortunately there was a weapon. Though more than \$200,000,000 had been raised in the United War Work Campaign last November the rival welfare societies really had very little money. What they had were pledges, only partially negotiable pledges for the most part, unless underwritten by bankers.

This gave the whip hand to the Supervising Committee of Eleven which contained such powerful underwriters as John D. Rockefeller, Jr., Mortimer L. Schiff, George W. Perkins, Frank A. Vanderlip and Cleveland H. Dodge. This committee sent its chairman, Raymond V. Fosdick, over to France to wield the whip. Mr. Fosdick has more than one man's share of vision and common sense. He was able to do some good in forcing the societies to divide the work among them instead of getting in one another's way. To the audible annoyance of the K. of C., he was able, for instance, to enforce the rule that no more than ten percent of any fund should be devoted to free distribution, a popular and naturally tempting pastime which, if too riotously indulged in, led to the neglect of less spectacular but more important work. He was able to say to the Y. M. C. A., with its 6,000 huts—just see how much it did—the K. of C. with its 800 huts and the Salvation Army with its 200 huts: "Here, why are all three of you working in this town and none of you working in the town near by? Spread out, spread out."

Of course Mr. Fosdick found other agencies buzzing around. Despite a close guard kept on the portals to the A. E. F., there had been a good deal of guard-running. Months before, a shrewd emissary of the Secretary of War had sent this warning to Washington:

"I would suggest that applications for passports be scrutinized with even greater care. It is difficult to understand on what pretext some of the people one sees in France obtained permission to go. One or two examples will suffice: In Bordeaux, Brest, St. Nazaire, Tours, Paris and Langres, I found Christian Science Reading Rooms for the troops run by American men and women. If the Christian Scientists are allowed to undertake specialized denominational work of this kind, why should not Baptists,

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Presbyterians or Methodists have the same privilege? Again, why should a woman who wants to establish a school of instruction for medical officers in Paris be allowed a passport? The same query applies to the so-called 'Massachusetts Commission' sent over by the State of Massachusetts to look after the welfare of the soldiers of the Commonwealth, as well as to the individual who represents the State of Washington on the same errand. Why should a passport have been given to the General Secretary of Churches of Christ of America? This is a Protestant organization, and the noisy presence of this gentleman in France greatly embarrassed the wise and intelligent efforts of General Pershing's Senior Chaplain in reconciling the differences between Catholics and Protestants. Incidents of this kind serve only to confuse the military authorities and to render more difficult a situation which in itself presents difficulties enough."

Well, the guard had been redoubled, but there were still a good many unexplained activities in evidence and the old evil of too many cooks was still spoiling the broth. As late as last May each returning transport was made comic by the welfare activities of secretaries from five different organizations and their squabbles finally led Secretary Baker to make a clean sweep of the lot, accepting the books, cigarettes and chocolate for each transport but barring, if you please, the secretaries.

As the great show drew to its conclusion at Versailles, the different sections of the General Staff were busy with histories of the war, each section and each activity making special note of its own mistakes so that the next A. E. F. might profit by those mistakes. In that spirit, Mr. Fosdick, out of his own and the bitter tragi-comic experiences of the A. E. F., has made certain recommendations to Congress.

Speaking as the supervisor of all welfare work, it is his opinion that in future such work should be cleansed of all sectarianism, for, just as the men in the Argonne did not fight as Protestants, Free-thinkers, Jews or Catholics, so there was no earthly or heavenly reason why they should have been in any way distinguished in their leisure hours.

Furthermore, it is his opinion that the leisure of the Army should be directly administered by the Army itself. That would, at least, remove the not infrequent patronizing note of our brothers of the welfare societies. We should no longer hear the accents of one who appeared to have been on a perfectly fascinating slumming trip among the troops. Occasionally an auxiliary worker would complain that the soldiers were not grateful to him. Why, in Heaven's name, should they have been? There was no more reason why a soldier should have been grateful to the secretary who

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gave him movies and letter paper than to the quartermaster who gave him a slicker or to the cook who gave him a mess-tin lid of oatmeal. There will be peace in the next A. E. F. only if all the men in it are soldiers. The soldier feels that his greatest gift to his country is his surrender of his own personal liberty. For a man who has given anything less than that, he feels precious little respect and no sense of fraternity.

That is Mr. Fosdick's opinion. It is also the opinion of practically all former buck privates. And they know.

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