## Reflections on Christianity and the Global YMCA

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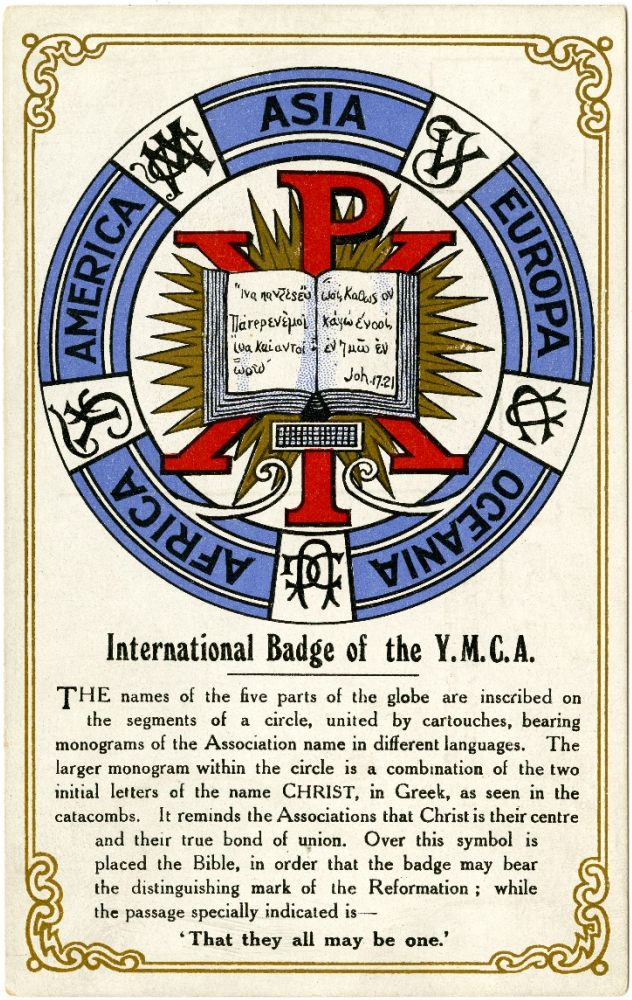


*Figure 1* The International Badge of the YMCA illustrates the global diversity of the YMCA and affirms the centrality of Christ's teachings and example to the YMCA.

The World Alliance of YMCAs offers hope to the world. As a global movement pursuing a *Just World*, it is worth examining the many barriers that thwart its realization. There are many obstacles external to the YMCA that hinder its work. There are also barriers internal to the YMCA that limit its ambitions. What follows is the YMCAs' journey in pursuit of a Just World.

This journey, like any, starts at the beginning.

Early in the Y's history, wherever a YMCA organized, it soon contacted other YMCAs at home and afar. One individual that these YMCAs could expect to make contact with was Henri Dunant. As many know, Dunant's impact did not end with the YMCA as he would go on to found the International Red Cross and became the first recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, the first of two to be associated with the YMCA. In the 1850s, though, Dunant was a young bank clerk in Geneva and a member of its YMCA. Dunant worked tirelessly in pursuit of his vision for an interconfessional and international YMCA. Furthermore, letter by letter, he and his peers learned of each other's work and the desire held by many to unite for a common cause. As a growing awareness of each other slowly manifested, YMCAs began to systemize their communications and publish excerpts of their letters.

In 1854, Chauncy Langdon of the United States wrote to the Paris Association "Oh Beloved Brothers in Christ, whether we be in Sweden or in Italy, in England or in Switzerland, in Germany or in Holland, in France or in America, let us be *one."* A year later, in 1855, Paris provided the perfect opportunity to bring the shared dream of a united YMCA movement into reality. That year Paris hosted the World Exhibition and the Assembly of Evangelical Alliance; (the latter of which counted numerous YMCA members amongst their ranks). Over the course of six days, nearly 100 delegates from eight countries

gathered. Given the movement's infancy, attendance was not limited to YMCAs; instead, a variety of associations comprised of young Christian men united in shared purpose were invited. Of the YMCAs in attendance, only 38 out of a known 338 associations sent delegates; out of the 99 attendees, 51 were French. George Williams, the honorific Sir had not yet been bestowed, in his early 30s, was one of the older attendees.

As William Shedd's history of the Worlds Alliance states, "They were not coming together to organize a world union of YMCAs… that already existed [as a result of the genuine bonds formed by fraternal correspondence" instead, they were gathering to meet, for most, face-to-face for the first time. In classic YMCA fashion, however, there was a full agenda.

The proposed agenda was twofold: First was a forum on "the temptations most common to young men and the means of overcoming them [and a discussion of the ] obstacles preventing the religious development of young men." The second issue was agreeing on a method of correspondence among all the Associations. What ensued was a much greater far-ranging deliberation. There were discussions on membership and whether there could be particular associations for students, workers, entrepreneurs, boys, and other groups. While much of the focus was on meeting the needs of young men working in retail (as the London YMCA was founded to serve), what came out of this discussion was the principle "that without distinction of class or creed, the YMCA could adapt its programme to the special interests of the widely differing groups making up our common society." The YMCAs' relationship with the Church also received a fair amount of attention. The French delegate Emile Laget addressed this declaring that the French YMCAs "have no ecclesiastical tendency. [But rather] have, in regard to the Church, one ruling principle, not the spread of any particular view but for the Church of God, which in the present day, is subdivided into special Churches." This position affirmed the YMCAs' ecumenical tendencies.

The institution of slavery was another topic that would shape the very foundation of the global YMCA. In sharing reports of the North American YMCAs, the Rev. Abel Stevens of New York introduced the problem of slavery. Within the context of his report, the problem was not slavery as a horrendous, dehumanizing system but rather the fact that "the question of slavery was one of so difficult a character, as almost to endanger the unity of the associations in the States." Fearful that this risk could cross the Atlantic, the delegation from the United States lobbied for and joined their compromise to the aspirations of the gathered when they proposed a framework for a global union. What followed next would sow a rotten seed in the very heart of the YMCA.

As mentioned, convening was less about forming a global union than celebrating an opportunity to thrive in each other's company. Nonetheless, throughout the YMCAs of the world at that time, there was a developing sense of national identities and aspirations of a global movement. Moreover, such efforts are regularly marked with constitutions, by-laws, and other founding documents, giving their shared bonds a visible form. The French YMCA came to Paris prepared with a framework. Their proposal preserved the complete independence of individual associations while calling for the members of the conference to unite under the general principle that "the Christian Associations have for their object the union of those young men who, regarding Jesus Christ as their god and Saviour according to the Scriptures, desire to be His disciples in their doctrine and their life, and to associate their efforts for the extension of His kingdom amongst young men." Once delivered, the conference moved to action. The French proposal, which perfectly captured the essence of their gathering, was to be voted on first. The US delegates, agreeing with the sentiment of the French proposal, consented but insisted that their

points be discussed next. The conference proceeded to get down on their knees and prayed to the Lord to guide their conscience. Rising, they voted and affirmed the French proposal.

As for the proposals of the United States, three were advanced; they were "1) That no difference of opinion on points not comprehended in the immediate aim of the Association should be permitted to interrupt their harmony," 2) that a certificate of membership should be provided to support Young Men traveling from Association to Association, and lastly 3) that the plan of correspondence and information sharing already devised be enacted. The last two were housekeeping; the first, that no difference of opinion should hinder unity was truly significant. Its intent was to disallow any debate on slavery and, in theory, other topics deemed to be political. The minutes record no prayer for these proposals. Only that they were "admitted and agreed to without discussion." The next day the conference re-convened. They affirmed what we today know as the Paris Basis, the fundamental principle for the global YMCA movement. They also ratified the three proposals from the United States.

French Proposal –

**"The Christian Associations have for their object the union of those young men who, regarding Jesus Christ as their god and Saviour according to the Scriptures, desire to be His disciples in their doctrine and in their life, and to associate their efforts for the extension of His kingdom amongst young men."**

United States Compromise -

**"That no difference of opinion on points not comprehended in the immediate aim of the Association should be permitted to interrupt their harmony,"**

*Figure 2*Comparison of French and American proposals

We can learn much from this episode. The YMCA is a supreme example of human endeavor, and the global Y's origins affirm this belief. Aspirational in intent, frequently pragmatic in approach, inherently contradictory - the Y is a beautiful enterprise. In many ways, the YMCA can be seen as a gift wrapped in a burden. The gift is this global movement comprising 120 countries or two-thirds of the world's nation-states. Clearly, there has been tremendous progress toward the first lines of the Paris Basis; "to unite those young men [and] to associate their efforts for the extension of [God's] Kingdom amongst young men."

The burden is rooted in the differing opinion clause. In 1969 World Alliance Secretary General Frederik Franklin reflected that "[t]he men of 1855 were a largely homogenous group. They were all evangelical in their interpretation of their Christian faith, all members of protestant denominations. They were an international group but from countries in Europe and North America only. They were all men and, with few exceptions, young men under 30 years of age." And so, with that context, the second clause of the Paris Basis, "to not let any difference of opinion interfere with harmonious relations," makes much more sense. As much as they aspired to adopt a global worldview, they were also bound by their identities. Thus, with that context, we can see that the YMCA was founded mainly as a privilege for white, middle to upper-middle-class protestant men.

Furthermore, while issues of slavery in the Americas may have caused some discomfort, they had the privilege of ignoring the issue if it meant disrupting their ambitions. Thus, here lies an inherent flaw – a supreme contradiction – at the core of this movement. Here lie some of the seeds of the barriers holding back the promise of a just world.

The intertwining of gift and burden, promise and compromise, is a thread that forms the fabric of the YMCA movement. It is the tension between the human and the divine, fear and truth. It binds past to present.

With the World Alliance formed, the global movement continued to gather regularly to share experiences, learn from each other, and, importantly, discuss, debate, and discern the true nature of the YMCA at any given moment. Reviewing past conferences, we can see that the nature of these exchanges has dramatically evolved over time. Moreover, the evolution of discourse can tell a great deal about who the Y is and what it means to be a Just YMCA, a YMCA that cultivates a Just world.

Again, returning to the idea of the Y being a gift wrapped in a burden, as referenced, two-thirds of the world's nations know a YMCA. What a gift! However, many Y's can trace their origins to Western colonialism and the evangelism of YMCA missionaries. The earliest World Alliance gatherings were planted firmly in Christian discourse, and many were directed towards evangelistic impulses. In 1884 the World Alliance gathered in Germany to discuss, among other things, "The best means of spreading amongst Young Men a deeper knowledge of the great Doctrines of Salvation," Five years later, in Switzerland, "**The aggressive missionary work of the Association**" was championed. In 1913, the interplay of colonialism and missionary evangelism was laid bare with sessions to explore "Our Young Men's Christian Associations: **Work of Conquest in the midst of unconverted young men**" and "The **Fields of Work to be cleared and sown**: The Young Men's Christian Association and the viral problems of the present time."

What a gift, and what a tremendous burden. The weight of our collective past can be overwhelming. Indeed, at a personal level. What can we, as individuals, do to dismantle the injustice that flows from the past? Colonialism, which extracted so much wealth and concentrated it into so few hands. The missionary enterprise which justified colonialism and deemed the "gift" of Christianity and western civilization as a fair exchange for land, resources, and people. Can the YMCA overcome such a burden?

It must. Moreover, it can because it has gathered many times before asking what can be done to improve the world. As each generation seeks its unique way to bend the arc of history towards justice, the YMCAs' evolution of thought and perspective has become increasingly international, specifically non-Western.

The First World War profoundly affected the YMCA as it did the globe. Following the war, when the global YMCA gathered, former themes, such as the YMCAs missionary enterprise, were replaced with the issues plaguing the times: Internationalization, Inter-racial exchange, the impacts of industrialization, and the needs of youth. Then, a global economic depression and the Second World War prevented a Worlds Alliance from 1937 to 1955, a gap of 18 years.

In 1955 the Global Y movement gathered again in Paris to celebrate a true milestone – the 100th anniversary of the Worlds Alliance. Like the First World War, WWII upended the international order and caused the YMCA to reflect on its purpose. Through this conference came a pledge that "the YMCA concern itself fully and without reserve with the promotion of international understanding, the easing of tension, the abolition of war, and the establishment of world peace [and to] continue to strive for the removal of every form of social or economic injustice and racial discrimination." Ah-ha, this now truly global movement was beginning to see its potential, not just as a Christian promise but as a human promise.

Speaking in Paris in 1955, Paul Devanandan of India traced the progression of the YMCAs theology. From its roots in seeking **interdenominational unity** to forming **interconfessional relationships**, Davanandan saw a stage set for a new arena of **interfaith cooperation** where the work of the YMCA could advance beyond Christendom. Devanandan seemed to intuit the next step when reflecting on interfaith cooperation; he said that there is "a kind of creative fellowship which can be qualitatively Christian, though quantitatively it may be composed largely of non-Christians." Is the next turn of this wheel human collaboration?

At that same event, a young Fredrik Franklin of Sweden stated the challenge more straightforwardly when he said, "the world is growing smaller, but let us remember this: it takes larger minds to live in a smaller world."

Much of the global YMCA's activities following the centennial certainly have the appearance of a body working to cultivate a larger mind that can hold multiple, sometimes seemingly conflicting perspectives without prejudice. World Alliance Secretary General Hector Caselli from Uruguay wrote in 1968 on YMCA renewal, calling for the Y to be "a more active part in the accelerated process of social change, reappraise its role in society, and hopefully become a more active movement in some key issues of today;" specifically "the struggle to eliminate racial, social, ideological and religious discrimination;" what he called "the local process towards humanization…."

In 1973, the Global YMCA gathered in Uganda for the 6th World Council to re-frame its shared purpose for the first time. For more than 100 years, the Paris Basis had united the Y's of the world. However, the global YMCA of 1973 was fundamentally different from 1855. After extensive review, debate, and soul-searching, the Kampala Principles were adopted. Kampala attempted to clarify and articulate for a then-modern audience what constituted the extension of gods kingdom. In their work, in addition to affirming the centrality of the Paris basis, they lifted five principles:

- To work for equal opportunity and justice for all
- To work for and maintain an environment in which relationships among people are characterized by love and understanding.
- To work for and maintain conditions, within the YMCA and in society, its organizations and institutions, which allow for honesty, depth and creativity.
- To develop and maintain leadership and program patterns which exemplify the varieties and depth of Christian experience.
- To work for the development of the whole persons.

Kampala appears to be a manifestation of Devanandan's prophetic observation in 1955 that the YMCA fosters "a kind of creative fellowship which can be qualitatively Christian, though quantitatively performed by non-Christian."

Following Kampala, the YMCA gathered in 1985 in Nyborg, Denmark, under the theme "Your Kingdom Come- living up to our responsibilities." At Nyborg, the agenda focused on the Y's responsibilities towards the "vast masses of people suffer[ing] from deprivation, poverty and hopelessness, conditions which are rooted in unjust economic and political systems, and relationships within and between nations." Moreover, by way of a bridge of sorts, the gathering "reaffirmed our understanding and conviction that, as it seeks to give an authentic Christian witness, the YMCA must counter the forces of evil that create injustices and accept the Gospel imperative to seek the Kingdom of God and its

righteousness" placing the motivation for the "no difference of opinion" clause of the Paris Basis squarely on its head. "The YMCA must counter the forces of evil that create injustices." What a bold statement.

Kampala was followed in 1998 by Challenge 21. Challenge 21 once again affirmed the centrality of the Paris Basis. However, unlike Kampala, which broadly spoke to the YMCAs' aspirations for how the work would take place "through love and understanding, creativity, honesty, the development of the whole person, among others," Challenge 21 put a fine point of where the YMCA was and where it was going. Challenge 21 declared that the YMCA was now "a world-wide Christian, ecumenical, voluntary movement for women and men with special emphasis on and the genuine involvement of young people and that it seeks to share the Christian ideal of building a human community of justice with love, peace and reconciliation for the fullness of life for all creation."

Challenge 21 was very action-oriented and endorsed the localized context of each member YMCA. In addition to "sharing the good news of Jesus Christ and striving for spiritual, intellectual and physical well-being of individuals and wholeness of communities," the movement was called to empower all, especially young people and women, as they work towards an equitable society. To advocate for and promote women's rights and uphold children's rights. To partner with people of different faiths and ideologies and promote cultural renewal.

They committed to working in solidarity with the poor, dispossessed, uprooted people, and oppressed racial, religious, and ethnic minorities. They aspired to be mediators and reconcilers in situations of conflict.

Regarding the environment, they would defend God's creation against all that would destroy it and preserve and protect the earth's resources for coming generations.

Kampala acknowledged that the YMCA's work had surpassed the Paris Basis, and Challenge 21 looked forward to the challenges that would define the 21st Century. However, the YMCA had yet to name the sources of its shared discontent fully.

*Figure 3* Comparison of the first World Alliance gathering in 1855 and the 19th in 2018.

The YMCA has come a long way since 1855, and the source of this expansive change is the World Alliance of YMCAs, specifically the increasingly global perspective that is the Worlds Alliance.

In 1991, World Alliance Secretary General Lee Soo Min of Korea reflected on the growing global dimensions of the World Alliance, seeing that as the Global Y movement expanded beyond its western origins, not just

tensions arose from intercultural exchange but “an enriched and deepened international character of the Y grew from this dynamic.”

This international character has constructed a mirror by which one can see and understand the impacts of a collective history. Specifically:

- The stain of slavery threatened to make hollow the YMCA’s godly aspirations.
- Complicity with colonialism spread the YMCA through pathways of suffering.
- Missionary impulses often saw people not as individuals but as groups to be conquered.
- The racism that, by default, centered western perspectives.
- A paternalism that condescends to any who are not male.
- A privilege that frequently favors comfort and harmony over change.

This beautiful international body has constructed a mirror that demands a response if one is brave enough to cast their gaze in its direction.

Will the YMCA learn from its past and circumvent the perpetual stumbling blocks that prevent moving forward? Will it de-center the old ways of being, thinking, and doing to make room for other forms of wisdom and knowledge? History seems to indicate a deeply rooted and widely held ambition to serve an ever-broader gathering of communities which has fostered an ever-broadening sense of identity within the YMCA. As Devanandan said, there is “a kind of creative fellowship which can be qualitatively Christian, though quantitatively it may be composed largely of non-Christians.” Alternatively, in the words of Saint Francis of Assisi, “to preach the gospel and if necessary use words.”