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White Father Mission

Makerere College
Kampala, Uganda
East Africa
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Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 18, New York

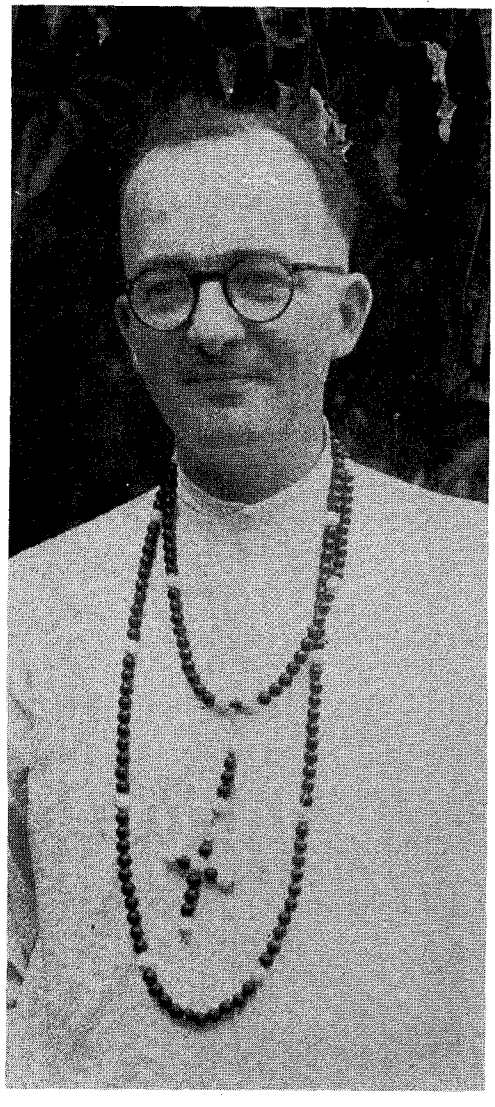
Dear Mr. Rogers:

It would be difficult to spend more than a few hours in East Africa without noticing the all-permeating and ubiquitous factor of Religion. The Nairobi and Kampala book stores are stacked with bibles, prayer books, and works on religious philosophy; shop and home walls (outside the Indian community) are decked with reproductions of Christian paintings - the crucifixion and a scene with Christ standing among a group of black, white and brown children being the most popular; and Africans of this generation seem mostly to be named Salvatore, Israel, Moses, Bernardo, and the like. In many of the bush districts one encounters a Sunday-school sense of modesty which causes a native to wince at unclothing even to swim a river; and the ordinary native 'boy' will take infinite pains improvising a screen in back of the tent - so that the all-male natives of the safari will not see the white bwana undress for his bath. The white residents are often agnostic or non-churchmember, and sometimes hostile to the activities of missionaries, but the native himself, since the days when Captain Lugard found Catholic and Protestant factions at war with one another in Uganda, has been demonstrative in his reactions to the impact of imported creeds.

In Kenya the missionaries provide the bulk of the supervision over native education, receiving grants of money from Local Native Councils. The six year primary and the six year secondary courses are given in the local language, with Swahili and English given as subjects in the later years. Religious indoctrination almost always is included. The assistance of missionaries in the problem of African education here is very important; with the annual expenditure per child amounting to less than $.80 it is obvious that non-missionary professional teachers could not be employed at European rates of pay. In the other two Territories of Uganda and Tanganyika the conditions of schooling are somewhat different but the missionary participation remains very important.

Education, however, is only one aspect of missionary activity. The influence of the Christian churches is being exerted by many other means: medical services, agricultural advice, and in some cases governmental representation have been furnished by church authorities. The longer, closer contact with native populations has provided the missionary with a store of knowledge often of value to both local and central governments. The political implications are two-fold, including the current authority of the clergy as organized today, and the institution of Christianity

built up during just more than a hundred years of missionary effort. Both the power of the clergy and the strength of the institution are measurable statistically - in terms of numbers of ministers and claimed converts - but it is doubtful that the mere arithmetic would be meaningful unless interpreted in the light of considerable personal contact with the ministers and the converts. With this in mind I have jumped at every opportunity to discuss the native and his relationship to the Christian missions with missionaries and natives. Among the more interesting of my jottings are some notes taken during lunch at the Kotoke Mission near Biharamulo, Tanganyika, where I was the guest of Fathers Lavergne and Beaudet.



Father Beaudet, whose youthful vitality and twinkling sense of humor were only half-caught in this snapshot, is the more commonly seen type of White Father. You cannot drive many miles on the rough dirt roads of Uganda or west Tanganyika without seeing a White Father tearing along on a motorcycle, risking his neck so obviously that you require no further proof of his own faith. Beaudet, when I first saw him, was leading a cloud of red dust up Biharamulo hill, his gondura or Arabic robe ballooning in the wind, rosary half-flagging behind his neck. The antique motorbike was coughing and spitting flame at his skirt, like some hell-pony just hijacked from the Devil's herd.

He had come to Biharamulo to pick up the Katoke Mission's weekly mail, bringing with him a gift of mangos and oranges for the District Commissioner from the Mission garden. While he waited in the queue outside the office door we got to talking about the weather, the local tribe, and guns. He was having some lock trouble with his shotgun, and was negotiating with a Swedish missionary, trying to obtain the latter's Mauser. The idea was to be able to kill antelope for the Mission larder.

His reply to my expression of interest in the work of the White Fathers was to say that I must come and spend an afternoon in the Mission compound sometime. The following evening I stopped at the Mission on the way back from a hunt, and left a haunch of buffalo with the cook. As I got back into my truck Beaudet came

out, thanked me, and asked if I could come for lunch and tea the next day.

When I drove up the incline to the grassy shelf on which the Mission is situated the sunlight, coming straight down, gave the weathered red brick of the walls a strange, etched appearance. The twelve-odd buildings, half inside a compound wall which was plain, beaten, and rain-eroded, had all been erected a long time ago - as ages of buildings in Africa go. They were simple and plain, but not ramshackle. Beaudet met me at the driveway and led me into a sitting room, plain-furnitured, windows uncurtained, walls adorned solely by a crucifix and a group photograph of the British royal family. High ceilinged, facing a shaded veranda, the room had the dank coolness which, combined with the simple furnishings, created the typical monastic atmosphere of peace and friendliness. We relaxed in a couple of heavy, worn chairs, and while we waited for the Father Superior to appear Beaudet, in his almost boyish enthusiasm, answered my questions about the Mission and the Order - or (more correctly) the Society. A Canadian, with experience in the last war as an artillery non-com, Beaudet was prone for a while to debate the relative merits of the British 25 pounder and the U.S. 105mm Howitzer; but I managed to re-steer the conversation, and he spoke with equal enthusiasm of the clothing, living habits, and discipline of the White Fathers.

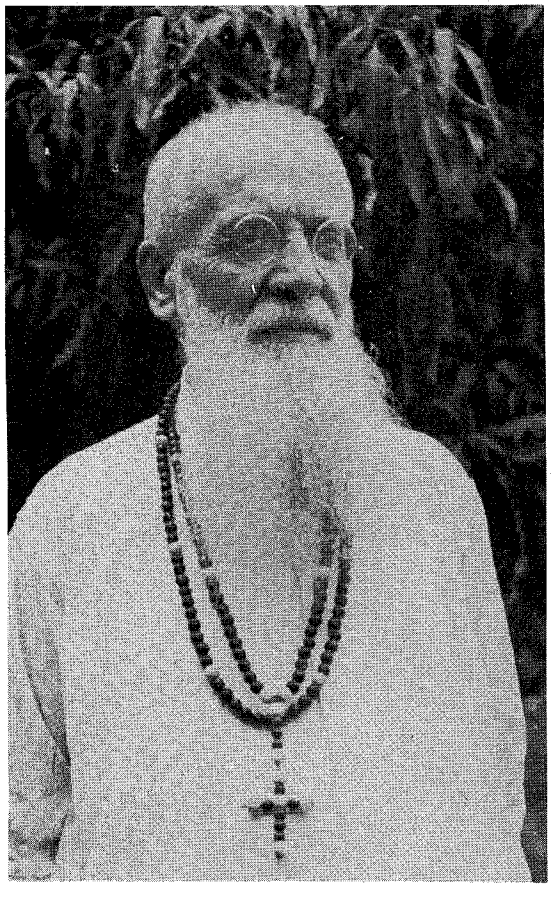
I learned that the habit (clothes) of the Society was of Arabic design, the idea being that the original White Fathers could better fade into the landscape of North Africa. They have a chechia or tasseled red cap, a burnous or hooded white robe, a gondura or inner robe with a military choke collar. Except for the red cap the entire habit is white, with khaki permissible for rough travel in the tropics. White stockings and black shoes are standard, but brown shoes are allowed in the tropics. The cloth ordinarily is woolen, but cotton is substituted in the hotter areas. The necklace rosary, shown in the photographs, is unique to the Order. It is made up of 15 series of beads, each series having 10 black and one white. Bishops, of course, wear silver or gold crucifixes and chains.

The original name of the order was the Society of Missionaries of the Venerable Geronimo. Archbishop (later Cardinal) Lavigerie was the founder; his choice of the pelican - a bird that feeds its young on its own blood - and his selection of the Arabic raiment would both seem to indicate his peculiar fitness for the task of converting Arabs and Africans. Not long after the clothing ceremony, in Algiers in 1869, the popular name of 'White Fathers' came into greater use among the natives; and later on the official name was altered to correspond.

In East Africa White Fathers work in small groups, the minimum number at a given station generally being three: a Superior, a Bursar, a Curate. Sometimes, at a place like Katoke - really just a small island of people in the middle of tsetse bush - even this number is reduced. Katoke, however, has the three, who, in addition to conversion and ministering activities, supervise the schooling of

some 500 native children. Of the 500, 280 are instructed by government registered teachers up to Standard VI, the remainder being pupils receiving preparatory instruction in the three Rs under locally trained instructors in outlying or 'bush' schools. In Standards V and VI the beginnings of English are taught, as well as the vernacular and Swahili. The support for this, financially, is derived almost entirely from external charities; the local laity, 3,600 for Katoke, is called upon for no more than token donations "just to avoid the psychological danger of letting parents think that the education of their children is a right which costs them nothing."

Kotoke-Mission, Beaudet continued, came under the South Nyanza (lake) Vicarate, with a Bishop Tetrault now officiating from Bukoba, 110 miles north. The former Bishop Huwiler, now retired and about 85 years of age, had received a number of papal decorations. He, like many others of the Society, had remained in Africa almost continuously, only using a small portion of the leave which may be granted every ten years.



At this point we got up from the chairs, and Beaudet poured another glass of beer for Father Lavergne who had just stepped into the room. A little, slightly paunchy man with a white beard, whom I remembered hearing conversing with the D.C. in Swahili, he looked to be just what he was - a typical French country priest. He speaks no English; so I asked Beaudet to please explain my surprised whistle-and-headshaking reaction to the statement about "leave every ten years - maybe."

Lavergne's amused reply was that he had gone 44 years without leave, going home only once during his entire service to visit his peasant family in Rodez. He seemed pleased to hear my impressions of Grenoble and Lans, and that my sponsoring Institute had had an American Irishman named McCarthy there studying sociology and Catholicism. I mentioned the snow-covered hills near Lans, and he brightened at once, saying yes, Lans is beautiful but not so productive as his home, not the grapes and wheat of Rodez. Then he went on, straining Beaudet's ability to translate by talking very fast, to tell of his early days in East Africa. He had come to the south Lake country in 1906, on foot from the docks of Bukoba, 110 miles up the shore. The safari had

included a number of pack mules, their skins smeared with lion fat to keep off the tsetse.

The Mission had been installed at Biharamulo before the point became a German administrative headquarters; the original Chief, father of the present Mkama, Ntare, had hated the Church from the beginning, and had died a pagan. In 1896 three White Fathers had been threatened with armed force, and the German authorities at Bukoba had sent a detachment of soldiers with a Maxim gun to protect them. Under German freehold, the Mission had owned 368 hectares of land (since given over to the British administration). Most of it had been for cultivation, the compound and outbuildings occupying less than two hectares. Lions were around the compound continually, and the walls were built as much to provide a night corral for the cattle as for any other purpose. Later on the tsetse became infected and the cattle died, but not before there had been several exciting lion episodes - including the killing of a maned lion inside the compound by a shotgun-armed Father.

Mud huts, of course, had been the first houses of the Mission; the bricks were stacked and baked down the hillside and the other buildings were erected while conversion and teaching activities went on. The greater part of the present buildings went up during the German administration. The Germans respected the authority of the pagan Chieftain, but they also established an order - a rule of law - which Father Lavergne liked much better than the state of things today. Corporal punishment was the basis of this order, 25 strokes with the Kiboko (hippo-hide whip) for minor offenses; 25 plus imprisonment for theft with 25 coming out of prison for good measure; and hanging in public for murder. The German attitude tended to make it much easier to get things done; the reason all the buildings of the Mission were erected long ago is that now the disciplinary effects of the German era have died out; under the present rule the natives will not work. The natives respected the Germans, because the Germans treated them like <u>natives</u>.

But even without added works, time alone had improved. The mango trees planted by his own hand had been bearing for years, their trunks now thicker than a man's body; and Lavergne could also take pride in his orange and tangerine trees - they provided fruit for the table, though they also drew millions of fruit bats into the compound. There had been the first World War, and he as a Frenchman had been sent south to Tabora; but his confinement had not amounted to imprisonment, and there had been German White Fathers to carry on the work. Then there had been the five years of Belgian rule, while the division of German East Africa among the two Powers was being debated.

The Belgians, to Father Lavergne, were by all odds the best. The men who replaced the German major and sergeant were churchmen, not the non-believers or non-practicing Christians who had come since; and their language was French. (This was all said without inflection, and I got the impression that Lavergne, a companionable and friendly man, enjoyed greatly being able to speak with the Belgians in his own tongue - perhaps to a greater degree than he realized).

The lunch, served in the adjacent dining room, was simple but ample. The third Father, Mathieu, bearded, young, and also a Canadian joined us at the table. Like Beaudet, his principal stock in conversation was humor - a good natured poking of fun at the natives, the administration, and himself. One of his anecdotes was of a lion, which he had seen walking parallel to his own path through the bush, the lion keeping pace, abreast, and only a few yards to his right. Frightened whispers were exchanged between himself and his equally unarmed African com panion. They were miles from any possible aid or shelter; and the largest laugh of the story arose from the fact that the Father had to lean on the boy for philosophical comfort. "What shall we do? What can we do?" he quaked into the native's ear. "Keep walking," answered the boy, "if God wants the lion to eat us, the lion will eat us; if not, there is nothing to worry about."

After the meal, while the others napped, Beaudet took me around the compound. He explained that their day's program, which included a total of seven and a half hours of sleep and two hours of prayer out of the twenty four, could be altered when Mission guests were present. Also, he said, certain of their austerity rules could be relaxed when guests were on hand. For instance, they could drink whisky while entertaining, but not otherwise. (This last was with a significant grin: the D.C. had given him a bottle of Scotch for Christmas, and he was making it clear that he would be very welcome, now, at drink time).

The tour took me through a number of useful, practical buildings: shops, class rooms, quarters, and dormitories. Beaudet's own room looked like a general store, cluttered with all sorts of tools, repair kits, wire, nails, and a large book case. There was a carpenter shed with a grindstone and assorted planks, planes, saws and spokeshaves; and a series of almost open-air class rooms, roofed, but with two sides unwalled, blackboards and desks arranged on the flagstone floors. Lavergne's orchard filled the inner court, and the outside area included a football field, houses for the native employees and their cultivation-plots. Towards tea time Beaudet excused himself and went out in the front to attend a sort of native "sick call" - bandaging cuts, handing out pills to a line of African patients.

The natives, at this first glance, seem to lean much on the Mission. For many of the young ones, the school and church provides a program to occupy much of their lives; and as they grow older the mission helps to fill the emotional void created by the destruction of the old diversions of tribal warfare, ritual, and things like king-worship. Being prone to prefer a supernatural rather than a scientific explanation, the East African native stands in great need of a new faith to explain new, strange events.

Whatever attitude one may entertain concerning the present-day usefulness of Christianity to Americans or Europeans, it is the only property presently in stock in the Western World which stands ready to replace these tribal allegiances which Western influences have destroyed or are destroying. And the missions in

East Africa, of course, have accompanied their spiritual teachings with an immeasurable amount of practical, physical help for the native and often for local-government colonial officers.

Apart from the practical aspect, the more ornate and involved ritual of the Catholic Church has a special appeal, making Catholicism perhaps more directly acceptable to the native in process of detribalization than that of the less ceremonial sects. Its institutional strength, built up through the life-work of men like Father Lavergne, and its contemporary vigor, epitomized in young priests like Beaudet, constitute a considerable influence in the lives of large segments of the native population.

The Christian religion has not unified the tribal fragments here, nor has it provided anything similar to the drive-and-fire for progress and for the hasty absorption of technology which Shinto-Bushido and Emperor worship gave to the Japanese population; but it does seem to be softening the impact of Western ideas and lessening the friction between European and African.[1] In many areas the conversion of natives to the white mans' religion has provided the only common ground between the two races. The bitterest enemies of the missions will generally admit that such "common ground" is a prerequisite to any satisfactory settlement of racial problems in East Africa.

Sincerely,

John B. George

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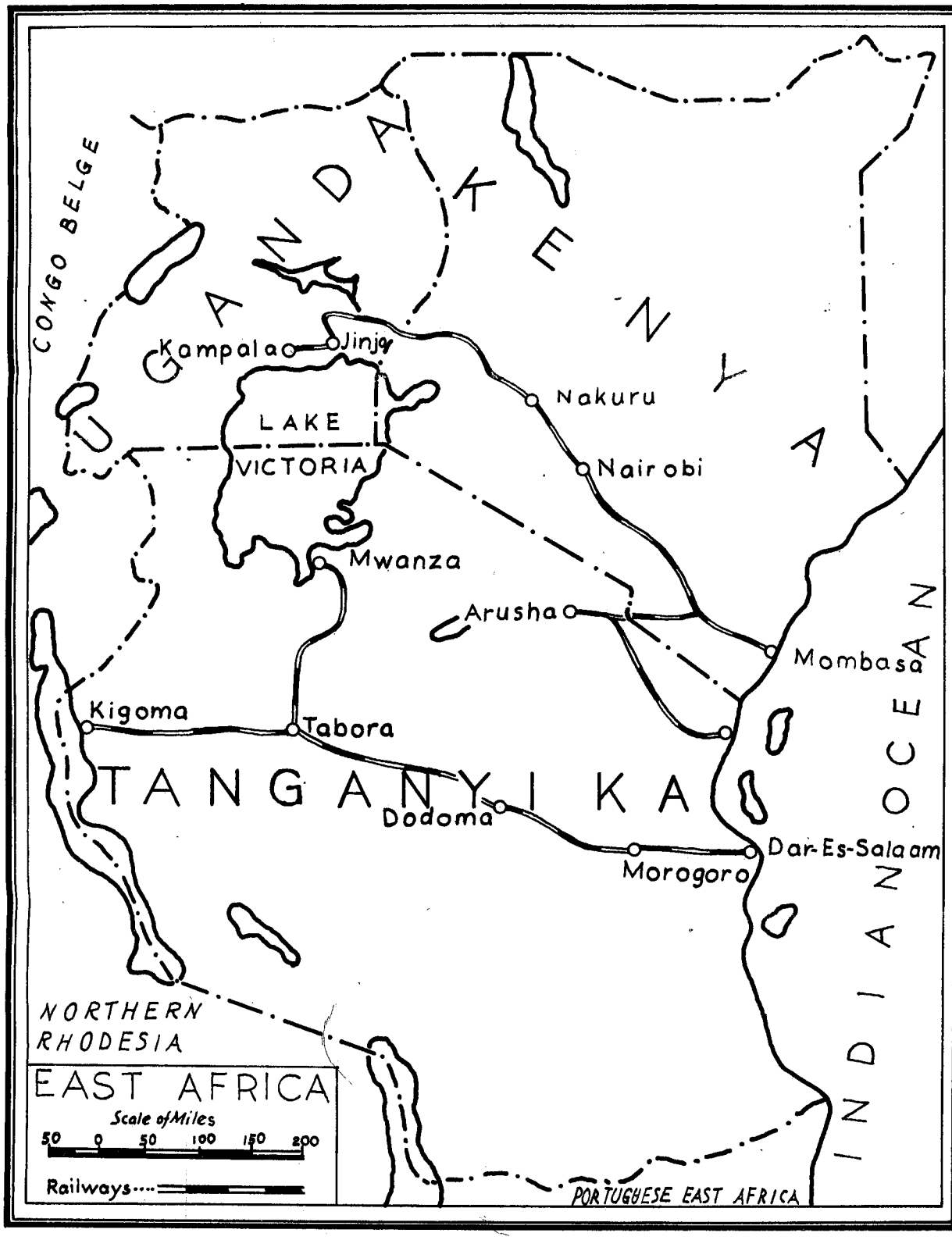
1. I have left the Indians, Goans, Arabs, and African converts to Islam out. To include them in any thinking about the value of this "common ground" would complicate the problem tremendously - and it might actually give this common ground a negative value, in terms of a sharper cleavage between African and Asiatic elements. Christian natives seem to resent the Hindu and Moslem elements, the more, for having become Christians.


CONGO BELGE
UGANDA
KENYA
Kampala
Jinja
Nakuru
LAKE
VICTORIA
Nairobi
Mwanza
Arusha
Mombasa
Kigoma
Tabora
TANGANYIKA
Dodoma
Dar-Es-Salaam
Morogoro
INDIAN OCEAN
NORTHERN
RHODESIA
EAST AFRICA
Scale of Miles
50 0 50 100 150 200
Railways
PORTUGUESE EAST AFRICA