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WDF-16
Missionary: Dick Keithahn

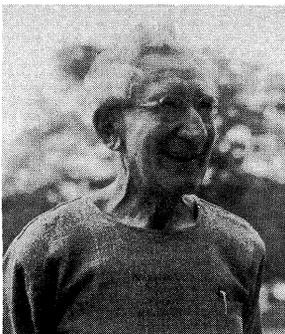
c/o American Consulate
Bombay, India
August 1, 1957

Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers,

If anyone had suggested that I could live four days on raw carrots, peanuts, wheat porridge, cold baths and do-it-yourself-in-a-bucket laundry---and like it---I would have curled my lip and wagged my head, No. Well, I just have---eaten raw carrots etc., not curled my lip etc.---and I've had a good time. It all depends on the company.

The company was the Reverend Ralph Richard Keithahn, a 60-year-old American missionary, and the place was his mountain-top Christian Fellowship Ashram in Kodaikanal, South India.



Dick Keithahn

After 30 years in India, Dick Keithahn is right at home. His "we" usually means "we Indians." He wears home-spun clothes and home-made sandals, rattles off the Tamil language as if he were native-born, and in general goes with the Indian countryside like curry goes with rice---except for that good, smiling Teutonic face of his.

He leads a simple busy life of service to Christians and non-Christians in the Madura-Ramnad Diocese of the Church of South India, where he is, among other things, director of the Rural Economic Program.

All over that hot, hot, sprawling plain, he goes into the dull and lonely villages and he sees, he listens, he questions, he teaches, he shows and, for those admiring villagers, I suspect, he is.

He smiles, and speaks in that precise but non-insistent voice of his: "I came out here to 'convert the heathen'---well, that's putting it a little strong, but that's the general idea. The thing is, I've found that God is wherever the heart is turned upward toward God. I've learned that my job is not to tell people how to follow Jesus, but to live as a Christian and confront people with it. I must proclaim the Evangel, the Good News, but no man by himself can convert another. Only the Holy Spirit does that. That true conversion is the heart's free response. Well. That's what India has taught me.

"I'm convinced," Dick continued, "that many Christians will learn much of the fullness of Jesus Christ when they come into contact with other religions." For himself, he has learned a lot about God and

about Christianity through Hinduism and Islam and Buddhism and Jainism, and a lot about Jesus through Mohandas K. Gandhi.

Gandhi himself wrote that when as a student he first read the Sermon on the Mount, it "went straight to my heart." If he could take that Sermon alone, he said, he would not hesitate to call himself a Christian. But Christianity as he saw it believed and practiced in the West, he rejected.

For Dick Keithahn, as for some other Western and Indian Christians, Gandhi, the Hindu, was a Christ-like man. "M.K. Gandhi," Dick wrote shortly after the Mahatma's death, "took Jesus the Christ and his way of life in earnest. You and I may differ seriously with his interpretation but we must stand humbly before his expression of the Truth as he conceived it. Has there been a greater since the Carpenter of Nazareth shook the world he lived in?"

I asked some people about Dick Keithahn. A young missionary in another district has a quick answer: "Keithahn! You mean that semi-Hindu? Do you know that he worships in Hindu temples?" A strapping ex-policeman, a layman in the church, expands his chest and smiles: "Ah! Keithahn is everything!"

A Martin County, Minnesota, farmboy, Dick went to Carleton College, then studied theology at Chicago and education at Yale before coming out to India in 1925. He took up a simple style of life, so that he could be "closer." Before long he found himself close indeed to India and Gandhi and the Independence movement. The end of his first five-year tour coincided with a request from the British that he leave the country.

He remained home long enough to marry his medical-graduate fiancée and to arrange to get back to India. Now he worked closely with Gandhi's "constructive program" of socio-economic reform, especially the revival of village industries. After Independence, Dick became one of the builders of Gandhigram, the rural training center (WDF-14), and then a teacher there. "Somehow," he says, "I keep getting busier."

Most of the year Dick works with others in the rural service of the diocese, directing villagers in digging wells, clearing wastelands to convert them into coconut groves and paddy fields, and demonstrating fruit orchards, vegetable gardens and poultry yards; teaching the way of cooperation in self-government and in farm-production through the working of village councils, producers' and shoppers' cooperatives, and assorted "milk unions" and "goat clubs"; encouraging village industry by teaching the skills for making grass baskets and mats, sandals and purses of leather, embroidered cloth and buffalo-horn combs, and finding a market for them; and teaching young women to cook well and sew and garden and care for their children, and managing schools for youngsters and adults as well.

For three months of the year, Dick is busy with the ashram, high on the mountain looking a mile downward on the plain. There is a simplicity there (including the menu) and a stillness, but it is no

rest-home. The ashram is open to "persons of various races, nations, faiths and callings, unitedly to worship God and find new power for serving India." As many of 40 people, Christians, Hindus, thoughtful men and women, come at a time to live together, to study and discuss "what-we-must-do," to work (in the garden, mostly), to agitate the spirit or invite the soul or whatever you want to call it.

Dick enjoys the life at the ashram. But he stands on the ledge overlooking the plain, then points a finger toward a cove in the distant foothills. "Right in there are people who have never been touched by a helping hand. My! If I were a young man again!"

Christianity is as old in India as Christianity itself. Christianity found its roots in India before it went to countries like England, Portugal and Spain. Christianity is as much a religion of the Indian soil as any other religion of India.

There should be quotation marks around that statement. It was made by Jawaharlal Nehru.

According to tradition, Christianity was brought to India by the apostle Thomas, who came to the Malabar coast around 52 A.D. and founded the Syrian Christian Church. A Nestorian community came four or five centuries later, the Portuguese brought Roman Catholicism in the early sixteenth century, and Protestant missions, chiefly from Britain and America, followed. Today the Church in India numbers close to nine million, most of them in the Southern states of Kerala and Madras, and most of them from the outcastes or "depressed classes."

There is variety, that the eye sees, in church architecture---the Hindu-like street-side chapels filled with ikons and incense, the Baroque facades of Portuguese-styled churches, a Scots Kirk, a newly-built hall of the Salvation Army. And there is as much variety in worship---joyous Indian hymns chanted to the clanging of a cymbal, High Church liturgy sounding of English cathedral, the platform preaching of a latter-day Billy Sunday.

There is variety, and there is division. In Kerala there are the original Thomites, the later "protestant" Jacobites, the Reformed Jacobites, the Mar Thomites, the Romo-Syrians, the Roman Catholics, and many others. Nonetheless, in 1947 several leading Protestant groups united in a Church of South India, and a similar step is contemplated in the North.

In the old colonial days, a foreign missionary, seeing material inferiority and human degradation on all sides, might have been expected to infer that an inferior culture and a degrading religion were the cause. So long as missionaries brought help and healing and so long as they stirred hearts and minds, good. But when confusing certain attributes of Western civilization with the teachings of Jesus they disparaged India's religions and culture, they ran into resentment, especially as movements of religious reform and national independence gained momentum; some Indians failed to see much difference

between foreigners who were encroaching on their country in the name of Empire, and those who were doing it in the name of Christianity.

According to many nationalists, the church did not have a "good record" during the Independence movement. And there has been some uneasiness since Independence: Naga unrest in the Northeast Frontier has been attributed by some to missionary activity; the celebrated Niyogi Missionary Activities Enquiry Report in Madhya Pradesh repeated the old complaint that missionaries were "denationalizing" Indians and inveighed against the "undue influences" (the "bait" of education and money offered to those in the depressed classes); and the continued presence of the Portuguese in Goa, the "Rome of the East," involves Indian Catholics in some suspicion.

The policy of the secular Government, however, has in general been to let missionaries continue their education, medical and technical-aid work, and leave the evangelization to Indian Christians. Actually, the number of foreign missionaries in India has gone up in the last ten years, and many of the newcomers are evangelists. I have yet to find the answer to that one.

The desire of Indian Christian leaders is that the church in India should continue to receive support and guidance from Western "co-workers," but on the basis of mutual fellowship, not Indian followership. Above all, they want resources that will enable them to educate their own clergymen and laymen.

This desire for equal status has a corollary which I found among the Thomas Christians: It is that the Vedas and Upanishads, the ancient religio-philosophic classics, should be regarded as a sort of Indian Old Testament, quite sufficient to introduce the New Testament to Indians, to whom the Judaic tradition is foreign. By the same token, the "adaptations" which the early Western Christians made from Greek philosophy may confuse the very teachings of Jesus. "Peter and Paul may have gone West," I was told with a smile, "but Thomas did come East at the same time."

Dick Keithahn was talking: "...The days when a missionary was an ambulance driver are over. What we need are nation-builders." And here he has joined Gandhi and Vinoba in the Sarvodaya program (WDF-15), which "comes nigh to the Christian approach. A 'casteless, classless society'! Here we are, engaged in a mission to provide for everybody's needs and everyone's dignity. This is a tremendous experiment in India, and it may have a lesson for all humanity."

Like Vinoba and other Sarvodayists, Dick's concern is for the villages. "I'm not worried about the towns and the cities. They will take care of themselves. But eighty per cent of the people are out in the villages, and we must relate ourselves to that situation. It's that staggering, universal poverty of the villages," and he shakes his head. Thirty years.

How to beat it? Two ways: "Voluntary cooperation and home industry." "I have nothing to do with Governments loans and that. I tell them it is very dangerous to depend on the Government. What we

need, to have it meaningful, to have it lasting, is voluntary cooperation, not just the extension into the villages of some paternalistic Government program. Let them cooperate on the ground. Let them see that they can have a more abundant life if they help each other, in ways they discover for themselves. The other thing is to prevent the produce of the villagers from being taken off for the profit of others. The way here is to produce more in the villages in order to make them more self-sufficient, to give them more occupation, to let them come up at least to the minimum level."

To Dick, I believe, this is not just a theory or a good idea or a sound program, but a challenge to himself as a Christian. Gandhi gave the challenge in the form of adherence to non-violence, faith in God as represented by Truth, and non-adherence to material things and false tradition. I would say that Dick has taken this challenge in earnest himself.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit...Blessed are they that mourn... Blessed are the meek..." "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethern, ye have done it unto me." "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily, and follow me."

I would say that Dick has taken that challenge in earnest too.

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