

Friends of Gandhi. Interview with Danish librarian and peace activist Holger Terp, first published in Danish at the Danish internet portal religion.dk, 5. August 2006. Interview and translation: Sune Nielsen (Mr).

Friends of Gandhi

One saw Gandhi as a Jesus-figure. The other saw him as a great prophet. At the beginning of the 20th century the destinies of two Danish women became closely attached to that of Gandhi.

Back in 1917, two Danish women from the Danish People's Church missionary organisation, DMS, visited Gandhi in his Ashram in Kocharab, Ahmadabad. It became a turning point in life both for Esther Faering and Anne Marie Petersen and they then took up correspondences with Gandhi that were to last for many years to come. Esther's relationship became almost a father-daughter relationship, whereas Anne Marie's relationship was a more independent one, as she was more mature and more critical of Gandhi's views.

From the beginning of this year, the two above-mentioned women together with journalist Ellen Hoerup 's correspondences with Gandhi have been available at the homepage of the Danish Peace Academy, published with the title "Friends of Gandhi".

It is the retired Danish librarian Holger Terp who together with Indian professor E. S. Reddy, former head of the UN office against apartheid, has edited the material. It is the idea that the letters should not only be published on the Internet but also as a real book in India later this year.

When I come to Holger Terp's home, the first thing that catches my eyes is all the material and books about peace which take up quite a lot of space in his living room. Here is material gathered over many years. Actually, all this material is the reason why Holger Terp chose to become a librarian – he wanted to get all this material in order.

He still reads in his books though one eye is completely blind and the other has much reduced eyesight. A couple of brain haemorrhages has forced Holger into invalidity pension, but, fortunately, his engagement in peace work has not diminished.

Holger Terp started his career in peace work back in the 1970's by choosing to be a conscientious objector. From his teenage years, he has been an eager advocate for peace and likewise eager opponent of war. In 1980, he became an activist in the Danish peace movement and in 2000 he was a cofounder of the Danish Peace Academy which is in a way a pendant to the Danish Defence Academy.

Gandhi has always played an important part in Holger's life and, therefore, Gandhi-literature takes up a great deal of space on his bookshelves. He has spoken about Gandhi on many occasions, and once he had done so at a gathering in the Danish peace movement, a young girl asked: "Why is it that we always hear about that old Gandhi?!" Someone then replied: "Because he is the best we got!"

When it comes to general education about peace, Gandhi is the best propagator we have. Holger Terp fully agrees on this point. Gandhi was an idealist who wanted his thoughts spread out to as many people as possible. In the same spirit, E. S. Reddy and Holger Terp now want to spread the knowledge about Gandhi's thoughts by showing us how they were expressed in his correspondences with a couple of Danish women. And they were not just any women! Both Esther and Anne Marie gave up their carriers in the Danish Missionary Society (DMS) in order to be able to keep their friendships with Gandhi. Like he, they too were idealists and worth a study.

So what exactly united these corresponders besides idealism? What are the main threads through 20 years of correspondence?

H.T.: It is all about being able to think in non-conform ways. I once had a friend, a young fellow who often visited me for a game of chess. Then at some point he got his call-up to do military service. I still had chances to meet him now and then, and after some time in the Danish military, I began to observe certain changes in his behaviour. He became very correct and timely in anything that he did, actually, you could well use him to set your clock. Moreover, he also grew more and more conservative in his opinions, and it was as if he had changed into a totally new person very different from the friend I once had. So in my view, to be able to become a soldier and kill other persons you will first have to be disciplined and rectified. On the other hand, you have to think in non-conform ways to be able to create peace.

Gandhi writes in a letter to Esther:

The general body of Europeans who have come to India have succumbed to the vices of the East instead of imposing their own virtues on the East. It could not well be otherwise. Religion has not made a lasting impression on them, as we see demonstrated even by the present war. My theory is that modern civilisation is decidedly anti-Christian. And what Europeans have brought to India is that civilisation, not the life of Jesus.

Both Esther Faering and Anne Marie Petersen came to India to bring the life of Jesus as their main purpose, but unlike many other Europeans at that time, they were able to think in non-conform ways. At least they did not do what the British colony power wanted from Europeans, when they took up correspondence with Gandhi.

These two women were both schoolteachers and were sent to India by the above-mentioned DMS to start up new schools. They both went on a study visit to Gandhi's ashram, as they wanted to study his school system. This visit became much more than an ordinary study visit and much more than the missionary society back in Denmark could stand. DMS told them that they should cut all connections with Gandhi immediately.

rel.dk.: Was it because Gandhi was a Hindu or was it in order to please the British authorities?

H.T.: It is difficult to give a precise answer to that question. One of these points could be the reason or they could both be the reason at the same time.

End of story was that Esther resigned from DMS, as she preferred to continue her correspondence with Gandhi. Shortly after that, Anne Marie also resigned in sympathy with Esther, and because she also did not want to give up her friendship with Gandhi.

rel.dk.: Much of the correspondence between Gandhi and these two ladies concentrate on Gandhi's freedom fight for India and the peaceful means he used in order to reach this goal. Still, in one of the letters to Esther, Gandhi tells her that you need the ability to kill before you can choose not to do it. Is this not in opposition to the way that he is normally depicted as a pacifist?

H.T.: Not at all, the point is that Gandhi was not a pacifist. Gandhi was a Hindu, and even though there is a non-violence idea in Hinduism, the idea of ahimsa, this has never prevented Hindu nationalists from developing weapons and taking part in wars. Hinduism is not pacifism, as you eg find it in the New Testament. So that is the difference – but I would like to point out that those people who know what they are doing, people of some wisdom, they will always choose not to do evil no matter what religious background they have, and this also goes for Gandhi.

Especially in his younger year, Gandhi sometimes argued for war as a political instrument, and he actually supported the British troops both during the Boer War and later on during World War I. In return he then expected the British Government to loosen its grip on his homeland.

Gandhi's lack of pacifism was lively debated by the end of the 1920's when the Dutch pacifist and priest Bart de Ligt discussed this subject with Gandhi publicly. He claimed that Gandhi's lack of pacifism was one of the major obstacles in the struggle for the independence of India. Gandhi also discussed this subject with the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber.

He even had a Muslim pacifist friend, namely Abdul Ghaffer Khan, who lived and worked in the north-western part of India, now Pakistan. Abdul Ghaffer Khan was sent to prison many times because of his use of non-violence in protests against the British colonial power. Today, it is worth remembering that Islam can result in pacifist acts and not only militarism and terrorism.

rel.dk: Was Gandhi under influence by religious personalities from other religions than his own, and did such possible influence made him more pacifist?

H.T.: Yes, definitely, and in addition to the ones I just mentioned, I could also mention Tolstoj, who sent the Sermon on the Mount to Gandhi, which made him very exited and inspired him from that time on. There was also the British missionary C. F. Andrews who became Gandhi's good friend in India and later wrote several biographies about him.

I have even seen homepages that claim that Gandhi became a Christian in the last weeks of his life and that should be the reason why he was assassinated. But I have not seen any proves of such claims.

rel.dk: And to this group of religious friends and debaters came two Danish women, missionaries from the Danish People's Church...

H.T.: Yes, Esther Faering, as the very young an inexperienced woman and Anne Marie Petersen as the more mature woman who could act politically, something that Esther never ever did.

The two personalities resulted in two different courses of correspondence. Esther looked upon Gandhi as a father figure, even a Christ figure, and she called him a truth wideness. Anne Marie also admired Gandhi, but she also saw him, as someone that she could discuss different issues with taking a more critical standpoint. For her, he was not a Christ figure, rather some kind of prophet, i.e. someone more human in nature.

rel.dk: Christ figure or prophet... that both sound very religious to me – and Christian. When you then add that both women left the missionary organisation of the Danish People's Church in order to continue their correspondences with Gandhi – was it not actually because they had found what they were looking for in Gandhi. In him they found real Christianity?

H.T.: Well, he he – that is a good question... maybe...

It is a fact that they continued to be Christians and saw Gandhi as an exponent for many Christian values, which they believed in. He was a non-Christian who stuck to Christian values more than any Christian.

Gandhi showed deep respect for their Christian faith. In what ever he did, the least he wanted was to manipulate with other people, but in stead do something edifying. He was always very concerned about Esther, and in one letter to Anne Marie, he once wrote:

I have so often told her, her living at the ashram can be justified only if she not only retains undiminished her Christianity but that, in the environment of the ashram, it becomes purer and more refined than ever before.

Both women were Grundtvigians (N. F. S. Grundtvig was maybe the greatest historian, poet, educator, religious philosopher, hymn-writer, and folk leader that Denmark has ever produced, 1783 – 1872), and in Gandhi they also saw a Grundtvig figure. Like Grundtvig in Denmark, Gandhi in India was a pioneer and leader in general education and school reforms and he was a defender of freedom rights.

Gandhi, on his side, was also interested in hearing about Grundtvig and, among other things, Anne Marie told him how Grundtvig succeeded in creating fundamental educational reforms in Denmark without using violent means. Gandhi hoped that he could accomplish something like that in India too. In several letters he expressed his deep admiration for what he heard about Denmark, and he saw it as the best thinkable model for a coming free India.

rel.dk: Gandhi corresponded with many people all over the world. How important was the correspondence with the Danish women in this context?

H.T.: It had a great importance, at least the correspondence with Esther Faering. In my view, these women were among the most important friends that he corresponded with. In fact, Gandhi was very selective regarding whom he corresponded with, and only very few were allowed to call him Bapu (father) as Esther.

As for Anne Marie, he always followed her school project with great interest. In September 1921, she set up the National Christian Girls' School in Porto Novo to the south of Madras, and for many years, she here ran a girls' school with very little money. Though she did not have many means to support the school and herself, Anne Marie always supported Esther and her family. Esther's family often came down with different illnesses and her husband, who was a doctor, had a difficult time finding a job, so, in the end, Anne Marie employed him at her school. Gandhi always worried about these problems, as can be seen from the correspondence.

Not until India's independence, things seemed to brighten up for Anne Marie. Gandhi found ways to let some funds go to her school project, which then flourished over a short period of three years. However, many years of hard work had had a deteriorating effect on her health, and she died shortly after things had finally taken a

turn for the better. Fortunately, Anne Marie's school project continued after her death and today, it is a big flourishing complex including both a school and a seminar.

rel.dk: As stated in the begging, you and E. S. Reddy now want to spread the knowledge about Gandhi's thoughts by showing us how they were expressed in his correspondences with a couple of Danish women. What, in this context, have been of most interest to Mr. Reddy, and what made him contact you?

H.T.: E. S. Reddy's interest in Gandhi goes many years back and he has especially been interested in Gandhi's correspondences with people around the world. He has been able to find a lot of interesting stuff in Gandhi's Collected Works, but the correspondences with the two Danish women is a special case (three, when including journalist Elle Hoerup), as I have been able to find a lot of extra material in Scandinavia, which has not been publish until now.

What is also interesting is that many of the women's letters are preserved until today. Normally, you always find letters that Gandhi wrote to this and that person and never letters that he received from someone. This is because Gandhi never kept any piece of paper or anything else for that sake, as he would see that as waist. In stead, he would give such a letter to one of the pupils in the school of his ashram to use it as writing paper.

As for the general knowledge about Gandhi in Denmark, Holger Terp tells us that all of Gandhi's works were translated to Danish in the inter-war period, so that was a period when many people learned about him in Denmark. Actually, Gandhi's thoughts founded the basis for civil disobedience under the German occupation during WWII. The well-known evacuation of Jews from Denmark to Sweden was an example of that, as the initiators were people who had read Gandhi and were inspired by him.