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CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN EXPERIMENTS IN ASHRAM LIFE

I

THE ISSUE OF HOMELESS EXISTENCE

Several authors and religious persons—chiefly those who chose new ways of approach to Hinduism—have focussed attention on homeless existence (*āshram* life). Klostermaier¹ raises the question whether homeless existence in India is still a way of living which is suitable to our time. He characterizes a *sannyāsi* as a homeless pilgrim, as someone who is all the time on the road and denies himself everything in order to reach the infinite. The author refers to the difficulties in accepting the holy man who is a homeless. The *sannyāsi* in India and the religious in the West are faced with the same difficulty. At times the homeless are highly respected, at other times they are looked down upon with contempt. An Indian homeless will be confronted with these perils. In his considerations Klostermaier centres the problem around the contemplative monk, who devotes himself fully to prayer.

In his survey he refers to the former efforts of de Nobili, Beschi, de Britto and, later, Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya and also to the difficulties which arose not only from their way of living but also to those which were created by the Church. Brahmaband-

1. Klaus Klostermaier. "Sannyasa—A Christian way of Life in Today's India." *Indian Voices in Today's Theological Debate*, ed. by Horst Burkler and Wolfgang M.W. Roth (Lucknow: I.S.P.C.K., 1972), pp. 170-197.

hab pursued two ways of religious life: the *sannyāsi* as the contemplative monk, who stayed in a monastery or *math*, and the wandering mendicant or *parivrājaka*. This vision was never realized. Further, Klostermaier mentions the non-Catholic and the Catholic *āshrams* of recent times. The Catholic *āshrams* of Kurisumala and the Shantivanam come first in the Catholic tradition and they try to lead a religious life in an Indian manner. These attempts are not radical enough, as yet, for the religious are attached to fixed places and are not pilgrims without a country. In brief, Klostermaier describes only the Hindu way of living which a Christian homeless could adopt. Besides, he starts from the sphere of life of a homeless, the *sādhana*, which has a broader meaning than the spirituality in its ordinary sense. Finally, the author speaks of the preeminence of contemplation as the characteristic trait of a *sannyāsi*.

J. Monchanin² considers the *sannyāsi*, the homeless as the most characteristic exponent of the Indian mentality. A homeless renounces everything and is continually on the way towards in search of Brahman. Because India has not yet founded its Anthony or Benedict, a person devoted to religion is able to follow but one way, the way of absolute isolation and contemplation as was the case in ancient Christendom and as is still being done in a few monasteries and these can adapt themselves fully to India. As the homeless keep India on the move, similarly the Christian monks have to keep the Church moving, by being always in search of God. Hereby Monchanin strongly emphasizes the so-called monastic or contemplative ideal as a witness of the absolute. The realization of an Indian Christian homeless existence, of an Indian Christian monachism, is the only way to make Christianity more indigenous.

H. Le Saux³ later known by the Indian name Abhishiktananda, first underlines the priority of the contemplation within the Church. Further, he points out the stagnation in communicating the Christian message and in the growth of the Church. The Church in its outward appearance seems foreign to India; a Chris-

2. Jules Monchanin and H. Le Saux, *A Benedictine Ashram* (Tiruchirapally: Saccidananda Ashram, 1951); Jules Monchanin, *Ermîtes du Saccidananda, Un essai d'intégration chrétienne de la tradition monastique de l'Inde* (Casterman: 1957).

3. Abhishiktananda, *The Further Shore* (Delhi: I.S.P.C.K., 1975).

tian homeless existence, according to H. Le Saux, would show the Hindus that the Church is not merely a big institution but is also a great spiritual reality. Even heterodox Indian monks have contributed to the development of India and so monks are necessary. De Nobili's or Beschi's influence is said to be active even today, because these pioneers lived as homeless monks. Perhaps monachism should serve only to preserve the Indian heritage just as in ancient times the monks in Europe saved the ancient patrimony for posterity.

It is clear for H. Le Saux that organised religious life as it exists in the West, is not suitable to India. Besides, for adaptation to Indian homelessness with regard to the way of living, an attitude to life similar to the one of the desert fathers is required. He thinks that rules such as those of St. Benedict offer the possibility to organise the *āshrams* or the monks. He distinguishes three categories: the hermits, the cenobites in an *āshram*, and the wandering monks. The religious or homeless should get a thorough training and always remain in contact with a monastery to get a chance of spiritual renovation. H. Le Saux goes back to the ideal of Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya.

Bede Griffiths⁴ first refers to the Church in India as he actually sees her gaining ground only through much labour and effort. Except for the Syrian church in Kerala, the Church, properly speaking, succeeded nowhere in forming an Indian community. Only when Christianity really got acquainted with the country and its culture, it found acceptance. De Nobili took strictly to the way of living the life of the homeless or *sannyāsi* and at the same time to a deep study of the Indian way of thinking. The Jesuits—among whom the most noteworthy are Fr. G. Dandey and Fr. J. Johanns—have continued the latter with their language study and the study of the philosophical thinking of the Hindus. Much more important, however, is the continuation of the former approach of de Nobili: to tread the path of the seekers for God, *par excellence*, the homeless. Further, he refers, on the one hand, to the efforts made by Monchanin and Le Saux, and on the other, to Francis Mahieu at Shantivanam and Kurisu-

4. Bede Griffiths, *Christian Ashram: Essays towards a Hindu-Christian Dialogue* (London: 1966).

(The American edition of this work is known by the title *Christ in India*, N.Y.: Charles Scribners, 1967).

mala, respectively. The continuation of the monastic and mystical tradition in imitation both of the ancient fathers of the West and Indian homeless existence in the East, must offer the cue for a real dialogue with Hinduism. Here, he closely follows J. Monchanin.

Francis Mahieu or M.F. Acharya,⁵ states that homeless existence is a development of the former *āshrams* of the *ṛsis* or sages. When the Brahmanical caste became a priestly caste a new form of monastic life had to arise and this produced the *parivrājakas* or wanderers, the *bhiksus* or mendicants and the *sannyāsīs* or homeless. The orders emerged to counteract the deviations of the unorganized *sannyāsi* existence. Further, Francis Mahieu describes the present situation of the countless number of *maths* or monasteries and wandering *sādhus* or monks. He refers also to the *āshrams* of great men, which are spread all over India. The life in the *āshrams* closely resembles the life of the first Benedictines and Cistercians. In various places, the Ramakrishna Math and Mission have modern *āshrams* with libraries and medical equipment. Besides, there exists the Bharat Sadhu Samaj, the association of monks for the whole of India, which tries to keep the *sadhu* ideal untarnished.

If anyone believes that homeless existence is on the wane in India, reference may be made to the *āshrams* of Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave. The founders think that this kind of life will lead to the real renewal of India. The booklet *Ashram Observation in Action*, written by M.K. Gandhi, is deeply rooted in the Indian tradition of homelessness and at the same time it is connected with one of the few pleasant experiences of M.K. Gandhi with Christendom: the Trapists at Durban in South Africa. M.K. Gandhi even called this monastery a model for his *āshram*. The history of the Church in India has no monastic tradition except for de Nobili's experiment. The religious congregations, even the Indian ones, follow Western ways. But Christian monasticism should not simply be transplanted, but be based on the directives which are the outcome of Indian homeless existence or *sannyāsa*.

M.F. Acharya⁶ also emphasizes the contemplative life in the

5. Mahieu Francis, "Monasticism in India", *Clergy Monthly Supplement*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 6 (June-July 1964).

6. M.F. Acharya, "The Contemplative Dimension of the Church", *Clergy Monthly*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (1969), pp. 145-155.

light of the recent Catholic theological thinking. Contemplative life is a sign of the awakening and deepening of human existence; we have to become really "spiritual" men, witnesses of the divine spirit within us. Further, M.F. Acharya refers to the pilgrim Church which is continually on the way towards the final goal in which the eschatological character of the Church consists. The monastic life within this Church on earth is the prelude to the final fulfilment. The decline in the liturgy goes along with the disappearance of true contemplative life. For this reason the monks became the most important renewers of the liturgy in the Church.

The desire for renewal which pervaded the religious institutes from the time of the second Vatican Council in the Catholic Church, did not do away with contemplative life. The Council insists on solitude and silence, prayer and austerity for the religious of contemplative orders. The ordinary people will understand the Church in India only when she spreads contemplative religious life everywhere. India only knows religious and spiritual life as it manifests itself in homeless existence or *sannyāsa*, and the Christian *āshrams*, in imitation of M.K. Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave, will certainly be understood.

First of all M.F. Acharya draws the conclusions with regard to the training of the religious, which has to be based on a link between the Christian and non-Christian monastic life. He distinguishes three levels in the dialogue between Christians and Hindus. The first is the study of religious writings: from these studies an understanding and an explanation of the Hindu-Christian texts has to be reached. The second level is not merely an academic study, but chiefly an interhuman relation in the collective approach to the general human problems. The third consists in sharing each other's religious experience. This takes place by using one another's methods and the life of prayer; only on this level Christendom and Hinduism will be able to meet each other.

Asian monasticism has two characteristics which distinguish it from the religious life in the West. First, notwithstanding all juridical structures as they are described in codes and rules, the East does not accept any coercion; for instance, the obligation under sin in the observance of religious life. Secondly, there has never been any conflict between the active and contemplative homeless. In the first place the monks feel called to participate in a general and universal state of life which surpasses the boundaries of separate institutes. They have a strong yearning for homeless-

ness, a steadfast search for God without doing violence to anyone in word, thought and deed. Thirdly, there is an urge to devote much time, at least one to two hours a day, to meditation.

II

THE MODERN CATHOLIC EXPERIMENTS

After World War II, some Catholic experiments, called *āshrams*, have been undertaken in India in order to come to a better understanding of Indian homelessness and Hinduism. A few such experiments are described here.

i. *Shantivanam Ashram*

The first form of a Catholic experiment which will be treated here is *Shantivanam*, the 'Place or the Forest of Peace'. J. Monchanin of the Société des Auxiliaires des Missions left France for India in 1939, and he worked for some time in a small village parish. During this period he developed some ideas about a new method for approaching the higher castes of India. In 1947, together with Dom Henri Le Saux, he made a report to the Bishop of Trichinopoly and proposed a way of religious life, both Indian and Benedictine. The Bishop gave them his blessing and thus they founded the *āshram* on the bank of the river Kaveri, in the vicinity of a village called Kulitalai.

In 1957 Jules Monchanin died rather suddenly and H. Le Saux remained alone. H. Le Saux began a wandering life; he spent his time partly in the Himalayas and partly in various places in the country. The *āshram* seemed to be doomed, but then B. Griffiths took his place and Monchanin's project continued.

The ideas of the two founders were identical on this one point: Both wanted to assume the Indian manner of life, but in this they had to be prudent. In the meantime J. Monchanin had acquired insights into the Indian mentality and H. Le Saux brought along the theoretical knowledge of the different rules. The rule of Benedict became the starting-point and the rules of the Indian monks were placed next to it. The two starting-points referred to one and the same thing, namely, homeless existence, a way of living which they as Christians wanted to take up in order to realize

an Indian christian monachism. The name "hermits of Saccidānanda" indicates their aim: to go in search of the Triune God, but in an Indian garb. *Sat* means the principle, the very source of all-being, God, the Father; *Cit* means thought, as image of the real meaning of Logos, God the Son; and *Ananda* means the bliss of love, the Holy Spirit.

It is their express wish to be *sannyāsis* therefore they stick to habits which they can easily take over, such as vegetarian diet and, the wearing of the orange robe. With regard to this sort of adaptation they always look for a justification in the rule of St. Benedict, with the poor around them and the Hindu homeless. Like St. Benedict they take peace, pax, as the motto of their community and from there the name Shantivanam, forest of peace, *santi*. From Benedict they also borrow the *familia* with the *abbas* or father as leader. They both wish to bring this idea back into the *gurukula* and the *āshram*. They look upon this *ashram* as a small priory or cell and the *āshrams* may naturally come within the frame of a greater monastic connection, as the Hindus have big monasteries. These big monasteries run the risk of making compromises, with the result that solitude, poverty, silence, and strictness may not be observed to the extent necessary, in a personal manner.

J. Monchanin and H. Le Saux took ultimate solitude, which can only be based on real peace or quiet in the full sense of the word, as their ideal. With the help of the Benedictine rule and structure they hope to find a way which fully corresponds to the Hindu quest of God, for which reason they abandon everything in order to become one with the one God. Study and spiritual reading is their work, and prayer is the culmination of a monk's life. The monk sets aside production and lucrative work, but devotes his energy to the preparation of prayer, which on the one hand consists in the vocal prayer of liturgy and on the other in the strict contemplative prayer. They both form the *opus Dei*.

J. Monchanin and H. Le Saux have thus found a way which is a counter-part of Hinduism and they try to justify this. The call to be a monk, a homeless in the strict sense, is the pivot and all the rest the rule; the structure and the community life is subservient to this purpose. The peace of the *familia*, is the foundation and the starting-point in order to be really a monk or a homeless. The *āshram* is a community of sons around the father or *abbas* like the Benedictine *familia*, which should make it possible to renounce everything in order to find God. The monastic ideal

is uppermost in the minds of these two monks. They find similar, specific indications in St. Benedict's rule and in Hindu tradition with regard to training, hospitality, poverty, asceticism and the life of prayer. Hinduism appears much more flexible in the different variants, but for this the discernment of spirits and the simplicity of the Benedictine rule can be used in order to realize both an Indian and Christian homeless existence.

ii. Kurisumala Ashram

Holy Cross-hill or Kurisumala, derives its name from the place a benefactor of Kerala gave to the founder. The ground lies in the higher mountain region of Kerala, and besides the building complex there is a farm for cattle-breeding. The cross which overlooks the *āshram* seems to be dedicated to St. Benedict. These points show how this *āshram* was started in the midst of the Syrian church communities of South India.

In 1958 Francis Mahieu O.C.S.O. and Bede Griffiths O.S.B. had arranged everything for the erection of a religious community according to the Syromalankara rite. When Mar Ivanios joined the Catholic Church his order of the Imitation of Christ was drawn into the so-called active apostolate and the Syrian church communities had almost no contemplative monasteries anymore except for the very small group which stayed behind in the Jacobite Church. After his acquaintance with India, among others with J. Monchanin at Kulitalai, Fr. Mahieu came to the conclusion that the tradition of the Syrian church offered better possibilities for an Indian contemplative life. These plans were well received by all official authorities and with the help of the Benedictine father, B. Griffiths, who had come over from Anglicanism to the Catholic Church, they could be realized.

The community sticks fully to the rule of St. Benedict, as explained by the Cistercians. The community rite becomes Syro-Malankara. It is the rite of the Syrian church which was united with the Catholic Church in 1930. That choice was made with a purpose by the monks of the Catholic Church; it was meant as an act of reparation towards the Syrian Christians. In this way the *āshram* shows its ecumenical spirit. Besides, the Syrian and Indian customs were best preserved in the Syro-Malankara Church. The rule underlines hospitality for everybody and the

result is, now and then, Hindu *sannyāsīs* are put up at the *āshram*. This emphasizes the second task of realizing a real Indian monastic life in which the exchange of experience with Hindu monks is possible.

The *āshram* is accessible to all rites—neither the Latin nor the Syrian rite is required to be given up. Further, the *āshram* is considered to be the meeting-place of the different Christian groups in order to encourage a spirit of unity arising out of the quiet and peace of the monastic sphere, without any mutual coercion. Dress, food and other customs are borrowed both from the existing Syrian tradition and the heritage of the Hindu homeless.

The *āshram* has been justified only once by referring to M.K. Gandhi's favourable reminiscences of the Trappists at Durban in South Africa. A second explanation for the use of the term '*āshram*' was given because of the stock-farm, for in the classical Hindu literature reference is made to cattle-breeding in connection with the *āshram* mentioned there. The *āshram* must have been a community which was fully self-supporting. The Benedictine *familia*, too, is self-reliant and this creates a climate in which real monastic life becomes possible. The vow of stability, which does not allow the monks to go begging and implies self-reliance, is maintained in the Kurisumala monastery.

iii. *The Order of the Imitation of Christ*

This foundation of Mar Ivanios⁷ belongs to an earlier date than the above-mentioned experiments, but it deserves attention because it represents an attempt which was fully carried out by Indians. Mar Ivanios was born of Jacobite parents in the South of Kerala, in 1882. After successful completion of studies, the young priest became the head of the Mar Dionysios Seminary and afterwards he was called to the University of Serampore near Calcutta, to teach there. In 1919 he left Serampur and founded the first house of the Order of Imitation of Christ, the Bethany *āshram*. In 1925 he became Bishop and received the name, Mar Ivanios. In 1930 he joined the Catholic Church, together with a big group known as the Syro-Malankara church. From the Jacobite

7. Moolaveetil Louis, *The Spiritual Life of Mar Ivanios* (Vadavathoor: 1977).

church he brought along with him the Malankara rite to which he was very attached. A few members of the order stayed on at Perunad in the Jacobite church, and among them were some four monks of the first foundation of 1919 at Perunad.

Mar Ivanios was somewhat under the influence of the Eastern monastic tradition and at the same time he had the strength to bring about some renewal here and there. This applied to worship as well as to religious life. After he had founded a branch for men, he also started one for women, the Sisters of Bethany, to which he added a third order. Although he had followed the rule of St. Basil in Serampore, here in Perunad he tried to achieve a synthesis of the rules of St. Basil, St. Anthony, St. Benedict and St. Francis of Assisi. The first Bethany *āshram* was a foundation in the wilderness, which had first to be cleared and cultivated. In Perunad he had a clear picture in his mind of the life-style of the desert fathers but he added a vow of stability to it. Like the *r̥sis* of classical India he wanted to spend his life in the wilderness.

Although he withdrew with his first nine followers into solitude, this did not prevent the people from bringing children to the *āshram* or monastery and so an orphanage had to be erected. Besides, the Bethany *āshram* became a place of pilgrimage where people flocked in large numbers. To the task of preaching he added the care of the poor, and he gradually started centres in the towns to help the lowest castes and classes in order to improve their standard of living. After 1930 this so-called apostolic task became much greater, and so the monachal character had to be abandoned to a large extent. Many monks were assigned to work as missionaries and spiritual advisers. Nevertheless, the monks tried to live as poorly as possible and to stick strictly to the prescribed rules regarding vegetarian diet and the like. Mar Ivanios adapted the rule and the life-style, as much as possible, to homeless existence.

Not only did Mar Ivanios get inspiration from the great rules of Christian origin, but also the Hindu monks and monasteries; and apart from studying the mentality of the *sannyāsis* he also came to know a great deal about usages and customs. The outcome was that he prescribed the orange robe of the kavi and found Christian variants for many other Hindu externals. He was not satisfied with just visits to monasteries; he also went to see different *āshrams*, chiefly those of R. Tagore and M.K.

Gandhi, the forest university and the model village, from which he borrowed a good deal for his monks as an established community. In this way, his convent, the Bethany *āshram* became the community of Mary at the feet of the Lord, of the industrious Martha and Lazarus, a combination of a life of prayer, service and missionary work.

III

THE MODERN PROTESTANT ASHRAMS

Among the Protestants there are two persons who lived the life of a *sannyāsi* or a homeless: Sādhu Sundar Singh and N.V. Tilak. The former, has made it clear by his life, in any case, that the Christian churches are really Indian only when they have people of this sort. They were sincere Christians who, in an Indian manner, succeeded in realizing the monastic ideal. Towards the end of his life N.V. Tilak withdrew and tried to gather a fraternity of baptised and unbaptised followers of Christ around him. Sundar Singh disappeared finally in the mysterious Himalayas. The Protestants realize that the churches are too much westernised and that they cannot establish contact with Hinduism. In the second decade of this century a number of them did not exclude a similar attempt at a real approach to Hinduism on the part of Christians.

In the experiments in the Protestant camp, the emphasis has fallen on the *āshrams*. A certain number of theologians have an answer for this, but it has to be noted that there is a great difference between theory and practice. The Protestant theologians do not see eye to eye with the two above-mentioned pioneers, but they prefer another startingpoint. They agree in this: they want to adopt Hindu traditions as opposed to theologians such as H. Kraemer, but at the same time they emphasize the charismatic character of the Church. After a short survey of the theorists' point of view, a brief description of a few *āshrams* will be given. These two surveys will be of great help to understand the present discussions about the renewal of religious life in all churches including the Catholic Church in India.

The Ashram as it is viewed by some Theologians

P. Chenchiah,⁸ a "friend of the Kristukula Ashram", takes a negative attitude towards the organized churches. In particular, the modern *āshram* of R. Tagore and M.K. Gandhi, P. Chenchiah saw a revival of the ancient Hindu *āshram*-concept, of a community of disciples around a master. He thinks it is possible according to this form of community to reach a formula for a church community different from the existing churches which are organized on Western lines. In these open communities he sees the possibility for a real dialogue out of which a renewed Christianity may emerge. Besides his theological vision concerning the church and the religious, he has some clear models before him: the group around M.K. Gandhi, which was accessible to everyone who in a Gandhian way wanted to lead India to a political and spiritual independence; and the forest university of R. Tagore which is not very much politically oriented but which tried to give an integral training in Indian culture under circumstances which underline the union of man and the cosmos.

P. Chenchiah tries to find a counterpart for his model in the classical Hindu literature. He considers the third stage of life, the *vanaprastha* the acme of Indian society. It is on the one hand the golden middle course between the over-accentuation of youth and the established order, and on the other a radical asceticism of the homeless. The youth and the middle classes are too involved in the course of affairs of the inside-world, which leads to a too great attachment to this earthly life. The ascetic or a homeless severs himself fully from life and rejects the gifts of life as useless or good for nothing. In the life of a religious-minded person, detachment is required and this can be obtained by putting oneself between the two poles of true living: God and the world. The third stage is the period of fully human maturity when passions do not predominate any longer, and yet, the interest in man, husband and wife, the world and religious conviction has not been quite lost. During this stage, a wise and at the same time responsible deepening of and reflection on the concrete existence are possible. There is here an opportunity to practise one's faith to the full in order to be a source of inspiration for the whole society.

8. Kāj Baago, *Pioneers of Indigenous Christianity* (Confessing the Faith in India series, No. 4, Madras: CISRS & C.S., 1969).

The *āshram*, according to P. Chenchiah, offers the possibility to come to true adoration of God, to realize one faith, not only through the interest in its doctrine, but by going in search of spiritual values in a consistent way of living. This requires an inner and outward sincerity, which means trust in God, silence, detachment, humility, abstinence and hospitality. These concepts, it is true, are also applicable to a monastic community, but they have to be viewed in the concrete sphere of maturity in which the wise man of the third stage plays the major role.

It is not a question of a fully organized community but of sufficient room in which each individual can come into his own. This is typical of Hinduism. The Hindu house in the old style always has an open courtyard to live in, the symbol of spiritual freedom which characterizes Hinduism. The caste-system has precisely this function of being a socially strong organisation in order to be able to be spiritually free. A homeless moves outside the social obligations in order to be a spiritually free man. Hinduism does not recognise a central authority nor institutes for religious-minded people. P. Chenchiah distinguishes between corporation and partnership. The former would refer to a united body with legal engagements; and the latter consists of a circle of friends on a voluntary basis without any commitment. This form of community, partnership is typical of Hinduism and should be the distinguishing mark of the churches.

Hinduism and all movements in the field of religion have reached great spiritual heights without an institute, and this raises objections against the churches with their administration, possessions, ritual, hierarchy and fixed dogmas and doctrines. Even where Indian religions—as for instance the Buddhist *samgha*—do have a certain fellowship, there this kind of community is essentially of no importance for the growth of spiritual life. This is in strong contrast with the 'onward Christian soldiers', the song which typifies the mission churches. The *āshram*, as a community, has to be something else; it should be a community which finds its vitality in the Gospel and the familiar surrender to Jesus Christ. The Good News should produce a inspiration which overcomes everything and not an army of highly disciplined soldiers who go to war, but a community, moved by the spirit, which through its trust in the Lord manifests its faith in his victory.

To this description V. Chakkarai adds the image of the People of God, as an example of the big tribal federation, which moves

on as a family. The *āsbham*, should work towards that end and in this way the churches would look like a gathering of families. This is obvious to the *āsbham*, but it cannot be carried out because of a misunderstanding. Most Christians wrongly believe that the *āsbhams* should be monastic *āsbhams*, communities. Strictly speaking, the *āsbhams* should stand apart from the churches as a gathering on a free basis. In this connection Chakkarai speaks of ecclesiastics and each of them should have its own character. India wants the church to be an animated body, an organism, and not an organisation, and in this organism the small communities again form organs of the great organism. It is a question of free communities in which the sermon on the Mount and Jesus' death on the cross are a new weapon in man's hand, more powerful than all violence and suppression. Both the Indian monasteries and the *āsbhams* are precisely such a living approach to all problems also in the field of organisation and politics.

S. Jesudason considers the *āsbham* mainly as the *gurukula*, the bond between master and disciple, but in the service of the Master, Christ the Lord, who is really the *guru* for all men. The leaders or ministers of the *āsbham* have to be like shepherds for their flock or like *gurus* for their disciples, who in turn have to trust them fully. The relation between master and disciple resembles the connection between parent and child. The boys and girls between the ages of thirteen and twenty-two, S. Jesudason suggests, should get a really Christian education and he invites the grown-ups to come to Christu-kula *āsbham* to receive a training in Christian marriage or to the state of celibacy.

The *āsbham* is the outcome of life and is again a source of life. Religion is not a part of life but life itself and for this reason it is possible in the *āsbham* to adapt oneself wonderfully to all circumstances because it is as supple as life itself. The classical *āsbhams* should not be considered as just religious *āsbhams* for monarchs have learned there to love their people and were schooled in diplomacy. The *āsbhams* are "spiritual" power-houses or laboratories for the experiments of life. The *āsbham* includes the whole life, from religion up to medical research, for instance, botany. The Vedic *āsbhams* do exert their influence either by sending out their students or through social, political or medical orientation.

The new *āsbhams* have adapted themselves to modern needs, because they pursue some special objects. Inside the *āsbham*, as

described in the Vedic prescriptions and the *Ramayana*, the presence of a man of God, who himself realizes a life-ideal and helps others materialize it, is important. India is in need of such experiments which emphasize the realization of God's presence. These *āshrams* are not allowed to have permanent bindings with churches or organisations. They should not be mixed up with the third or fourth stage of life either. The forest ideal is here chiefly meant provide the quiet of nature to help attain the divine experience.

M. P. Davis adopts another course by analysing the importance of the *guru* and he comes to the conclusion that Jesus Christ is the only and true *guru*. If Christians want to start an *āshram* the leader should be able to replace Jesus Christ as far as possible, and only the Bishop is able to do this with the full powers he has received from Christ. Thus Davis is opposed to Chenchiah, who sees the ideal of the church in the community without cult, without sacraments, while, on the contrary, Davis analyses the search for Christ, who is represented by his apostles, in the Hindu context.

The Protestant Ashram in Practice

The above-mentioned authors base themselves on facts and are able to point to a model which was tried out between the second and fourth decades of this century. A description of a certain number of *āshrams* given and the development of the life at these *āshrams* will follow next.

i. *The Christu-Kula Ashram*

The *āshram* at Tirupattur, about 180 kms. to the West of Madras, was founded in 1921 by Dr. Jesudason and Dr. E. Forrester Paton. The *āshram* consists of a hospital, a small school and buildings appropriate for an *āshram*. At Tirupattur we have a chapel, built in Dravidian style, a kind of copy of the Southern temples with the typical big gates leading to an enclosed garden and inside it a covered part erected on pillars; a common kitchen and a few cottages.

The whole complex of the *āshram* is financed out of a fund which was started with the principal capital of Dr. E. Forrester

Paton. 'The friends of the *āshram*' are more loosely associated with the *āshram*; they try to realize the spirit of the *āshram* elsewhere and, as far as possible, they share in the life of the *āshram* financially as well by supporting the community and staying temporarily at the *āshram*.

The hospital is the main object of interest in this work, because these two medical men thought it would be possible to render medical assistance without paid fellow-workers on the basis of Christian charity. Besides, there was the former express desire from the 'elder' and 'younger' brothers in England that race discrimination should be removed. After doing the mission work for some time, they found a better opportunity in South India to realize their ideal than in the usual mission hospitals. They erected the *āshram* here in order to give medical assistance to the people in the neighbourhood and thus to be a witness of Christian inspiration. Besides the permanent members of the *āshram* other Christians were requested to support this work for brief periods to gain an intensive experience of what it means to be a Christian.

After some time it was found that the children in the vicinity had no school to go to and so some members of the *āshram* decided to open a small school to meet this primary need. All this had to be done in an Indian way. The whole plan had to be adapted to the people around them and also to the life-style of the community which was kept on the same level as that of their neighbours. The rendering of humble service becomes the ideal expression of Christian faith on the part of members of the *āshram*.

In order to underline the Indian context, the chapel was built in temple style, and the hymns and the text-books which are composed and used are in the local language. In the chapel a morning and evening service was held. The *āshram* serves as a sort of retreat house where people get an opportunity to spend a few days in remembrance and prayer, and other meetings are also held there. There is a kind of training course or gurukul organized in order to make young people familiar with the scripture, church history, theology and practical works of service. The members of the *āshram* are also given such a course. In this way a nucleus of four permanent members and about sixteen volunteers—for short and long periods of time—has emerged. The purpose is to form an Indian, Christian community living together.

The community does not only offers medical assistance such as

the care of lepers, but also preaches the Gospel, which is chiefly done on Sundays when the members of the *āshram* go to the villages. The purpose is both to attend to the physical needs and to preach the Good News. The classical *āshrams* are taken as a model as also the *āshrams* of R. Tagore and M.K. Gandhi in order to make it a place for an integral training and to spread the evangelical inspiration in word and deed, individually and jointly.

In recent years Dr. S. Jesudason was contemplating to withdraw more and more from the medical work. This shows the chief aim of the *āshram* in his vision: the growth of spiritual life. After the death of the "elder brother", Dr. E. Forrester Paton became the leader of the community and he formulated this growing tendency in the direction of the "Coenaculum" (Last Supper) idea, according to which prayer determines the training by putting oneself under the guidance of the holy Spirit in order to enter the Kingdom of God. This "Coenaculum" community reveals itself in humble and merciful service, in sharing together the experience, and chiefly in mutual respect.

In this way, the family of Christ, the Christu-Kula *āshram*, becomes a community in which the attention is focussed on the growth in Christian life, and spiritual service is subservient to it. At the death of Dr. E. Forrester Paton a second tendency becomes clear when the question arises whether it is possible to continue the hospital and other projects. The foundation of a confraternity of laymen with perhaps a joint office-bearer is being considered. This has to be viewed against the background of the recently constituted Church of South India in which most Protestant denominations are united into one Church.

The second tendency moves consequently within the framework of the constitution of the *āshram* of which the founders are the consignatories. The full-fledged members, the *sevaks*, are asked to make vows after a novitiate of three years, during which period the candidate is a *balasevak*. He is allowed to remain in this stage by renewing the temporal vows every three years. The temporary members or volunteers, who need not be Christians, are also obliged during their stay at the *āshram* to observe the regulations of the *āshram*. This means that these volunteers have to observe celibacy and to accept the life-style of the members of the *āshram* as long as they stay at the *āshram*. The *sevaks* are bound by the vow of chastity and in everyday life they have to obey the *prathamasevak*,

the head of the *āsbaram*, in matters of administration. Spiritual leaders, the "elder brothers", may be elected.

The constitution of the *āsbaram* gives the impression of being the draft for a religious community in which the temporary members form an integrated part of the fraternity. However, the Christu-Kula *āsbaram* does not want to belong to any denomination; it wants to be interdenominational. The members have only to endorse the aims of the *āsbaram*. The constitution even foresees the recruitment of new members and the expansion of the family or fraternity in several places where centres of public health service, education and the improvement of the social conditions in the villages should be established, and student and youth camps should be started. At this moment it is not so far yet, now there is only the question how it will be possible to continue the *āsbaram* at Tirupattur.

ii. *The Christa Prema Seva Asbaram*

The *āsbaram* was founded in Poona, Maharashtra, in 1922 by J. Winslow. Further, W. Lash, later Bishop of Bombay and A. Robertson, who became the founder of a group which later on joined the society of St. Francis. In 1962 the then Bishop of Bombay, C. Robinson, had to close the *āsbaram*. More than ten years later Bishop Andrew was able to reopen the *āsbaram*, but now with other people. The Anglican Sisters of the Virgin Mary of Poona and the Catholic sisters of the Sacred Heart decided to start an ecumenical experiment in the same place.

The *āsbaram* was dedicated in the beginning to St. Barnabas, the "Son of Comfort", and in 1927 St. Francis of Assisi was added as the second patron-saint. This apparently insignificant pious addition shows a profound development within the *āsbaram*. It is not just the seventh centenary of St. Francis which inspired the members of the *āsbaram* but also the order of the Friars Minor. The Franciscan spirituality has indirectly exerted great influence on the life of the Christa Seva Sangha and the Christa Prema Seva Sangha.

The first acharya or leader, J. Winslow, was succeeded by W. Lash who stayed longest in office at Poona, and strictly speaking, his election to the see of Bombay was the immediate cause

of the suppression of the *āshram*. However, in 1934 it was decided to split up the *āshram*, for the members who did not feel any call to religious life established themselves in Aundh, close to Poona, under the former name of Christa Seva Sangha. The Christa Piema Seva Sangha became the monastic *āshram* of the 'society of the Service of Christ's charity.'

The rule, written by J. Winslow in 1928 for the Christa Seva Sangha, the 'Society of the Servants of Christ', demanded the equality of all members. The simple Indian way of living became one of the elements of the Sangha and therefore non-Indian members were asked to adopt India as their motherland. Through this J. Winslow expected to give the Christian churches an Indian look and to free them from Westernisation. The *āshram* was considered to be the nucleus of an organisation which could spread also outside India. The society is fully determined by its engagement in India which naturally results in assuming the ordinary Indian way of living. The material used for clothes had to come from the cottage industry, had to be hand-woven and orange or saffron in colour. The former demand points to M.K. Gandhi's cottage industry in which weaving is the most important activity, and the colour refers to the Indian ideal of abstinence. In the community, those elements which for the Anglicans really belong to the essence of the church, are kept.

At the beginning the founders do not want to proceed from a strong system or institute, therefore, the rule of the society does not want to fix a manner of life or method of working all at once. This flexibility is brought in keeping in mind the Indian *āshram*, where not everything goes on according to fixed rules. The society is divided into three branches: the first and second order of unmarried men and women, and a third order of laymen, who do not feel drawn to celibate life. However, all are full members of the *āshram*. The split in 1934 practically means that the third order prefers a separate establishment, on different lines.

The members of the third order are invited to share the life of the two other groups, although they are not refused to give up their property or income. They must be ready to lead a sober life and to share with others. Abundance and luxury are avoided and, in this manner, they have to demonstrate Christ's love for the poor, which he himself has chosen. Besides the spreading of the Good News and a sober way of living, the tertiaries chiefly apply themselves to making a brotherly spirit among the people.

In the *sangha* or society a relationship is established between the Indian *bhakti* or devotion and the Franciscan spirituality. What happens in the *āshram* in the concrete reality of everyday life, has to be brought into the outside world by the tertiaries.

The present inmates of the *āshram* in Poona, the Anglican and Catholic nuns, want to resume the line of the Christa Prema Seva Sangh of 1971 but with a more ecumenical aspect added. They, too consider it their task to propagate the ideal of poverty and soberness. They devote themselves to service on Franciscan and Gandhian lines. Further, they want to enlarge the *āshram* into a centre of meditation and in this manner they hope to change the *āshram* into an encounter-centre for people of different religions.

iii. The Christa Sisbya Ashram

This community of the disciples of Christ arose from a spontaneous movement within the Syrian-orthodox seminary in 1930 and settled down at Tagadam, close to Coimbatore. The *ācharya* or spiritual instructor was K.C. Varghese, but the coming of the Anglican Bishop H. Pakenham Walsh, the rector of the seminary, made a real *āshram* of it. The family is the starting-point of this *āshram*, where the non-celibates form the nucleus. Each family stays in its own house. The *āshram* and the other buildings were ready in 1936. The mentality of the *āshram* was summarised in four catch-words: poverty, obedience, piety and service. Faith, simplicity and holiness of life are the most important; and works of mercy come next in order of importance.

Bishop H. Pakenham Walsh, a family man, became the first spiritual leader of the *āshram*. After the death of Bishop Walsh in 1959 K.C. Varghese became the spiritual leader of a group consisting of about ten members among whom there were two priests and two nuns. Everyone who has taken vows has the full right to vote and all important decisions are made by a majority of votes. The relations with the different churches are excellent; the relation with the Syro-orthodox church is the most important. For the appointment of a new *ācharya* the advice of the Syro-Orthodox Bishop is taken as this Bishop is also an important adviser of the community. Each member of the *āshram* is supposed to have his own spiritual adviser and confessor. The children remain with their parents till they become adults, but,

when they have reached the required age, they are allowed to decide whether they want to settle down outside or inside the *āshram*.

In the sphere of prayer, faith-healing takes an important place, for Bishop Walsh cured people through prayer and by laying of hands. The life of prayer is determined largely by Syro-Orthodox customs; the languages are Malayalam, Tamil and English. Malayalam is used because all the inmates of the *āshram* come from Kerala. The tomb of the late Bishop remains still important for the devotional practices of the members of the *āshram*. Prayer and study have priority over manual work.

Among the activities outside the *āshram* first thought is given to the hill-tribes in whose midst the *āshram* was situated. The help given to them is by way of education and medical assistance. Besides, the *āshram* became a place where *pariahs* and casteless people and members of the tribes were allowed to settle down in order to be received by the inmates of the *āshram*. Gradually a shift has taken place towards Bible-classes, youth camps and missionary work. It is now their expressed desire to give an opportunity to whole families to follow recollections. Among the activities, the emphasis is laid on rendering spiritual assistance in which bishop Walsh included faith-healing as well.

Conclusion

Taking everything into account we may conclude that the Christian Churches see theoretical possibilities for a certain continuity between Christian religious life and the non-Christian homelessness. The religious thinkers in India take the view that the Christian religious are able to orientate themselves on the non-Christian *sannyāsa* ideal. There are some who even speak of sharing in another's religious experience, but what this precisely means is not yet clear to them. However, the mutual acquaintance means that the experience leads to an appreciation of Christian and non-Christian homeless existence and the removing of unnecessary prejudices with the result that a real dialogue may be brought about.