

The Indian Church and the Community Life

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To avoid any misunderstanding let me at the very first explain that I mean here by the word 'Church' the fellowship of all Christian believers who love the Lord Jesus Christ and openly confess Him as their Lord and Saviour whatever their denominational affiliation may be; the permanent membership of our Christukula Ashram is open to all such Christians. Also I have used the word 'community' (loosely used in India to indicate very many different things) to signify the intimate fellowship of a band of Christ's disciples united as a spiritual family of Christ (Christukula) for a life of prayer and humble service of the poor. This ashram was founded on the 7th of March, 1921, at Tirupattur, North Arcot District in Tamilnad; its basis is faith in and devotion to Jesus Christ, and its aim is to bring our fellowmen into living touch with Christ by a life of prayer, by love for one another and by a life of selfless service inspired by the love of Christ.

THE SUPRA-RACIAL ASPECT OF AN ASHRAM

This ashram was founded soon after the First World War had torn into warring factions the Christian nations of the West; moreover the colour bar in the West and specially the policy of Apartheid practised by white people in South Africa as well as the spirit of caste even among our Indian Christians had been playing havoc among the Churches. It is a very sad fact that in the election of Church Council members or even of ministers or bishops caste feeling asserts itself either openly or in a clandestine manner; this must be rooted out. Hence the constitution of our ashram says that we should seek to bind by the bond of love members of all countries, colours and communities or castes into a family of Christ.

THE SUPRA-DENOMINATIONAL CHARACTER OF AN ASHRAM

Our Lord taught us that by our love for one another we should let our neighbours find out that we are His disciples. He gathered together a band of twelve apostles who differed both from Him and from each other in very many different ways; by

this He showed us how love should transcend differences of opinion and nature. Yet down the ages Christians have fought with one another and persecuted one another because they were intolerant of those who differed from them in teaching or doctrine, utterly forgetting the clear teaching of St. Paul in I Corinthians 13 ; thus they split themselves up into sects and denominations. The ashrams stand for church unity in action. The ecclesiastical quarrels of the West have no place in the evolution or development of the Indian Church. Christian Indians have to think and act in the light of their Lord and Saviour and in the light of His Holy Word ; this is the main spring from which alone they should drink. Non-Christians are only bewildered by our sectarianism and look upon all of us as Christians only whether we be Roman Catholics or non-Romans. Ashrams stand for unity, not uniformity, for harmony in diversity.

IDENTIFICATION WITH THE LAND AND ITS PEOPLE

While Christianity is supra-national it has also the capacity to adapt itself to the various cultures, spiritual heritages, languages, customs and modes of expression of all the nations of the world ; ' they shall bring the glory and the honour of the nations into it ' (Revelation 21 : 26). The Constitution of the Christukula Ashram says : ' Since whatever things are good in our Indian spiritual heritage belong also to the realm of Christ's teaching, we should observe them and bring them into practice in our lives and teaching '. The impression that Christianity is a foreign religion is deeply rooted in the minds of all our countrymen whether they be the common people or the highly intellectual ones. Indian Christians trained from childhood in Western forms of worship, ecclesiastical systems, theological formulae, music, church architecture etc. have also contributed a good deal to this impression. Not only the essentials but even the non-essentials from the Western Churches have been incorporated into our manner of worship and into our theology ; when I was young even Indian music was banned as ' heathen ' ! Christian Indians must not neglect their ancient spiritual heritage : they must seek the treasures of knowledge, wisdom and beauty that lie hidden in the literature of the past. They should not reject these by hair-splitting derivations of Hindu religious terms and expressions which might ultimately lead them even to reject their own mother-tongues *in toto*. It is wonderful to note how our Lord in the days of His flesh talked to men according to their capacity, using words and expressions of their own to teach the deep truths of His Kingdom. Sometimes His very disciples failed to understand His words but His love bore with them and He spoke to them and to the people often in their ordinary human language in spite of its limitations. In order to save us He entered as it were not only into our flesh but also into our minds and being with deep sympathy. The indigenous expression of our Christian faith is in the

spirit of the Incarnation, and also in accordance with the spirit of His great apostle who became all things to all men that he might by all means save some (1 Corinthians 9:20-23).

The Christukula Ashram stands for identification with the poor in our villages by a life of simplicity including manual labour and by serving them in such a way as shall contribute to their spiritual, mental and material benefit. We have a hospital and school for the service of poor villagers where all work is done without any salary by unpaid members and volunteers provided only with the barest necessities of life. It requires much faith and prayer to depend upon God to provide us with the needed suitable workers on this basis, as proper human personalities are more essential for the work of His Kingdom than money, methods or equipment. But God has wonderfully supplied us with helpers during now more than thirty-seven years of this ashram's existence. In a way this is an answer to the oft-repeated charge that missionary work in India is based on foreign financial support. Also so often our Indian Christians, accustomed in the past to paid evangelistic work, hesitate to come forward for voluntary unpaid work. In this land, accustomed to religious men renouncing all for a spiritual purpose, more and more evangelistic workers are necessary who like St. Paul will work with their hands (or do some so-called secular work) to maintain themselves, and 'make the Gospel without charge' (1 Corinthians 8:18). Professionalism in religious work will harm its progress. It is sad that missionary societies and churches often place their financial needs in the forefront of their appeals. Before political independence men were willing to go and work in villages on a self-sacrificing basis, but now everyone seeks for security and comfort—even the very men who before courted imprisonment and lived lives of simplicity. Independence, while I realize its beneficial and bright sides, has not brought prosperity to the millions who in remote rural areas suffer from hunger and want and all kinds of illnesses without any aid. The Christian Church must inspire and train young people for self-sacrificing service in rural areas. Christian ashrams must be centres for training such voluntary workers. At Courtallam, near Tenkasi in Tamilnad, we have a Gurukula for training Christian young men for Christian work. The training consists mainly in the study of the Bible, especially the New Testament, in a thorough way, with a spirit of devotion and reverence, as well as evangelistic work in villages and manual labour at home. The response for long-term training is poor as there is no security of a paid job at the end of the training. But this Gurukula is very helpful for the quiet study of the Scriptures and for publishing the notes as commentaries in Tamil among our Christians. The lives of Church Fathers including Indian Church Fathers have also been published. During the summer holidays however students come in large numbers for short courses of study and this house is packed with them.

NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS

I should like to mention here the attitude a Christian ashram should take towards non-Christian religions and especially to the Bhaktas of other religions. The Tamilnad has produced Bhakti poets who have enriched Tamil religious literature with the sweetest and most inspiring devotional poetry, capable of charming any spiritually-minded man be he a Christian or a non-Christian. An attitude of contempt or lack of appreciation of these would be most unbecoming to a disciple of the Lord Who when He was on earth admired the faith of a Roman or a Syrophoenician. St. John speaks too in his Gospel of 'the light that lighteth every man coming into the world' and describes Jesus as the Logos, a word taken from Gentile Greek philosophy. My own personal feeling is that St. John would have used the term *Om* if he had been writing his gospel today for Indian Christians. Fear of syncretism must not make us blind to the fact that the all loving Father of mankind has spoken to our Indian Fathers also at sundry times and in divers manners in times past (Hebrews 1:1). Christ is also the real fulfilment of the best spiritual aspirations of those sincere souls of the past in our land. Truth is truth whether uttered by us or by those who differ from us. With Faber let us sing :

We make His love too narrow by false limits of our own,
We magnify His strictness by a zeal He will not own ;
For the love of God is broader than the measures of
mankind,
And the heart of the Eternal is wonderfully kind.

And with Whittier :

We faintly hear, we dimly see,
In differing phrase we pray ;
But dim or clear, we own in Thee
The Light, the Truth, the Way.

Even St. Peter, the Apostle to the Jews, made this wonderfully deep revealing statement at the Gentile Cornelius' house : Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons : but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is acceptable to him (Acts 10:34f). While standing firm on the unshakeable foundation of faith in the person of our Lord, the Christian ashrams have to help our Indian Christians to develop that healthy and correct attitude to non-Christian religions which will attract the non-Christian to Him as their Friend and Lord and not repel them as their enemy.

BRAHMACHARYA OR CELIBACY

Our Lord has told us that there are men who adopt celibacy for the sake of His Kingdom (Matthew 19:12). There is reason

to believe that some at least of the apostles like St. John were celibates. St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians that unmarried life would help a man to devote himself entirely to the things of the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:32-34). In the strong reaction that followed the great Reformation initiated by that wonderful reformer Martin Luther what was good was also sometimes thrown overboard along with that which was or had become bad. One of these was the fact that God does call men and women who have seen His vision to follow an unmarried life for the sake of fulfilling in their lives the vision they have seen. The life of our Lord was a shining example of this when we realize that He too was perfect in His humanity and entered into our human nature and its human instincts; that is the exquisite beauty of the Incarnation. In this land with its great tradition of sadhus and sannyasis and their spirit of renunciation there is a great need of men and women who for His sake will renounce all earthly bonds in order to devote themselves; their energy and enthusiasm, for His Kingdom, sublimating their natural instincts so that they may shine out in the service of His love and in the winning of others for His love—not by a suppression of natural instincts but by their sublimation. A few like Sadhu Sundar Singh may go as wandering prophets of the Kingdom to remote and dangerous realms and face martyrdom, but others will seek to unite their lives with others like-minded into a community or fellowship and seek to establish the new Jerusalem on this earth. Ashrams belong to this latter group, for Christianity is essentially a religion of living and working in a fellowship. This will prove that a spiritual family of Christ is even more real in its bond of love and sharing of spiritual and material things than an ordinary human family created by marriage (Matthew 12: 46-50).

PRAYER AND MEDITATION

In ancient ashrams rishis spent long periods in silent meditation. They practised yoga, seeking for union with God. In absolute silence they adopted different *yoga asanas* and went through the different stages of yoga such as (i) *chittavritti* or suspension of such mental faculties as would hinder the coming of God to meet them within; (ii) *dhyāna* or meditation when God appears before the yogi; (iii) *dhāranā* or firm grasp when the realization of God becomes full and He alone is real and the soul becomes absolutely insensitive to anybody or anything else; and (iv) he enters into *samādhi* or union with God and attains *shānti* or peace. *Sādhanā* or realization of an ideal was the object; and the rishis and the shishyas were not together in an ashram primarily for research or study but to realize an ideal.

Now in our Christian churches and in our religious meetings there is usually a great deal of singing, shouting, preaching, long extempore prayers, etc., but so often there is very little time spent in corporate silence or meditation (with the exception perhaps of

quaker meetings). We speak more to God than we let Him speak to us ; for this we need to be still. 'Be still, and know that I am God.' Elijah heard the voice of God only during the silence when the still small voice spoke to him. For forty days our Lord was in silence in the desert of temptation and later He often spent whole nights in silence with His Father on the hilltops. India is a land of Mauna (Silent) Sannyasis some of whom spent years together in silence. When Siva appeared to Thayumanavar as Mauna Guru that Tamil bhakti poet got from him, as the Guru Upadesh for which he had longingly waited, only two words : 'Be still' (*Chumma iru*).

In the ashram at Tirupattur we observe as times for silent meditation the morning and evening *sandhya* times ; *sandhya* literally means the *sandhi* or meeting of the day and the night (the evening when the sun has just gone down but the first star has not risen in the sky) and the meeting of the night and the day (the dawn when the sun has not risen but the last star has disappeared). Ancient ashrams were mostly situated amidst beautiful natural surroundings or by the side of rivers or amidst forests, conducive to meditation and the realization of God. Christian ashrams must be centres of training for prayer and meditation for our Christians through retreats when a good deal of time may be spent in silence alone and corporately. In the ashram at Tirupattur these times of silence, especially during the evening *sandhya* times, have been found most uplifting and helpful. Corporate silence has a stimulating effect on the growth of love and fellowship among those who take part in it. Christ's presence becomes real and no spirit of ill-will or separation of heart from heart is possible in such an atmosphere. In my experience the young Christian men who come to our ashram or gurukula find times of silence very irksome and get restless when asked to observe silence at specified hours of day or even night ; our Indian Christians must be trained in observing silence in prayer.

In our medical work also we pray for and with our village patients and in their child-like simplicity and faith they respond very well and co-operate with us heartily. Ashrams must be spiritual power-houses.

AHIMSA OR LOVE

In the most ancient ashrams Ahimsa stood for the reconciliation of conflicting aspects of life. The rishi and his disciples sought to live in harmony with the universe, loving both man and beast and recognizing the spiritual unity of all life. Ahimsa gained love by giving love, removing suspicion, doubt and hate, and thus breaking down the middle-wall of partition. Christian Indians have this same tradition, crowned by the Cross of Christ Who is our peace and has broken down the middle-wall of partition, having abolished in His flesh the enmity (Ephesians 2: 14-15). India is getting a name in the world as a peace-maker.

Should not we as Christian Indians be in the forefront of this great work of peace in a world that is being threatened with utter destruction through ballistic missiles and hydrogen bombs? Christian ashrams must work for world peace. Every evening at five (the hour that corresponds in India to the hour of our Lord's death in Palestine) our church bell rings, calling upon us to pray silently for peace on earth. May the Church in India be a peace-maker both at home and abroad!

From what I have stated above it will be clear that Christian ashrams aim primarily at building up the Christian life on the pattern of our Lord and His family of disciples, first among the members of the ashram itself and secondly among their fellow-Christians; the first concern is for those who profess and call themselves Christians. An ashram is not an evangelistic agency for work among non-Christians neither is it a *new* method of evangelism. It is bound to be evangelistic in its influence, for Christian life is nothing if it is not self-propagating and winning those around to the love of Christ. Even our Lord towards the latter part of His earthly ministry concentrated upon the training of His disciples by close intimacy with them, by taking them apart often to be with Himself alone and by teaching them privately. The greatest hindrance to the spread of God's kingdom is the inconsistent and the un-Christlike lives of professing Christians.

Members of an ashram can never forget that Christ's other sheep are also within the orbit of their work and influence. During the thirty-seven years of our work at Tirupattur we gratefully and with wonder realize how our non-Christian villagers love us and crowd round us for help and advice and listen to the Gospel of Christ. On Sunday mornings our temple, built in the style of Dravidian Tamil architecture, is often filled with Hindu and Muslim villagers; and they reverently join with us as we worship God in an indigenous manner with the kind of singing and adoration which appeal to them. At Christmas every year, after our Christmas service attended by a very large number of non-Christians, nearly two thousand villagers—Hindus, Muslims and Christians—sit down together for a simple common meal (a love feast), without any distinction of caste or creed, served by members of the different communities. An Indian pastor must look upon all the people in his area, not merely Christians but also Hindus and Muslims, as his parishioners, and love them, visit them and be ready to serve and help them. The ashrams stand for this wider outlook in the Indian Church and help it thus to gather into one the children of God that are scattered in the world (John 11:52). How our Lord's heart was moved with deep compassion and love when He beheld the crowd that gathered around Him 'as sheep without a shepherd'.

The success of evangelism cannot be measured in India by the mere numbers added to the Church annually. The Kingdom of God is like a leaven that worketh and produces mighty results secretly and unobserved. The importance of personal work

among individuals in an ashram and by work among churches cannot be over-emphasized. Senior members of Christian ashrams often go out travelling among the churches, either as members of a gospel team or in an individual capacity; they preach in churches, visit colleges and high schools and set aside a good deal of their time for meeting personally and privately individuals who come to them for advice and prayer. It is wonderful how young people especially respond to this personal and private care if one shows personal love for them.

Though the growth of permanent membership seems very slow, the Christian ashrams have trained many young people who have come to them for shorter or longer periods as volunteers and have gone out into various spheres of life; and we trust and hope that they will exercise an influence for God's glory in the churches to which they belong and among the people with whom they live and work. In order to encourage *grahastahas* (family people) to carry out in ordinary life as far as possible some of the ideals for which an ashram stands we have what we call Friends of the Ashram. These are expected to meet for retreats in an ashram once a year and also keep in touch with senior members of the ashram through correspondence at other times.

'I saw a new heaven and a new earth . . . I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband . . . Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he shall dwell with them, and they shall be his peoples. . . Behold, I make all things new.' (Revelation 21:1-5.) This is the dream, this is the vision of Christian ashrams; pray for us.

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The peculiar faith of Christianity is that there are two points of view from which every truth must be approached—a human point of view and a divine. There is the truth as man sees it from his predicament as man, and there is also the truth as God reveals it to man in terms of God's own purpose for man and for the world. So that the whole truth lies in holding together both these under one insight. Thus, life judged from the human end alone leads men either to a dreaming about utopias or to a renunciation of life's responsibilities; while life judged from the divine end alone leads men either to a dreaming about milleniums or to a denial of our temporal existence. The whole truth is affirmed only when it is recognized that we may not speak about life without speaking simultaneously both about man and about God, and about man as man and God as God. Indeed, we state both sides of the truth only when we state them in tension—man in tension with God, and God in tension with man—for to fuse them both together, as we do when we disguise man with divinity or enmesh God in human systems, is to destroy both.