

Zdeněk Štipl: The Christian Ashram Movement in India

Abstract

This thesis deals with the Christian Ashram Movement. The Movement represents a remarkable experiment of Christian inculturation in India, through which Christianity attempted to penetrate the cultural as well as the religious world of India. In spite of its long-lasting presence in India, approaching almost 2000 years, Christianity is still generally regarded a foreign element in the country. The story of Christian ashrams has been developing continuously throughout the 20th century and the idea of an ashram can be found in use across the various Christian denominations. First ashrams were established by the Protestant churches, especially in southern India. However, the Catholic Church got hold of the Movement in the late sixties, as a consequence of changes that were brought into the life of the Church by the Second Vatican Council. The Movement reached its peak in the seventies and eighties. At that time the number of ashrams in existence exceeded one hundred, they were found in every linguistic region of India, and the idea of a Christian ashram spread out not only to the neighbouring countries, but even across the globe.

In the first chapter a brief overview of the history of Christianity in India is presented through the prism of consecutive periods in the development of Christian approach towards Hinduism. This historical development creates a huge complex of distinctive and essentially typical features of Christianity in India. Some of them are soundly criticized by the Movement's exponents; some can even be classified as the direct causes of the Movement. The second chapter deals with the concept of inculturation. Its ideology has been rather vaguely defined by different authors and Church authorities likewise, and thus its broad frame covers the Christian ashrams as well as the Movement itself. The third chapter narrates the history of the Movement. Comprehensive description of the origin and development of the Christian ashram's idea is presented in this longest chapter, each of its consecutive stages is always critically regarded and viewed in close connection with the general development of Christianity in the course of the 20th century. The fourth chapter systematically analyzes the idea of an ashram as a phenomenon. There is an astonishing variety of opinions regarding the essential features of any ashram, as can be found in the works of different authors as well as ashramites themselves. This diversity bears witness to the tumultuous changes of the ashram's idea, but it also reveals the semantic vagueness of its content. The conclusion evaluates the

Movement and presents a number of different interpretative perspectives, through which the Movement and the phenomenon of an ashram can be considered.

This thesis presents the findings of the fieldwork carried out for many years in India. It sums up the existing literature on the topics of the Movement and Christian ashrams. The thesis is the first and only Czech contribution to the research field.