

## **CONTROVERSY OF BEARD**

**Fr. Varghese Paul, SJ**

A recent 2009 judgement of the Supreme Court refusing a Muslim student's pleas to sport a beard has become a hot topic of discussion. The question of beard is as old as man himself. In the Bible some men were caught as spies of King David and the one half of their beards were shaved off. When the news reached David he sent a message: "Stay at Jericho, till your beards be grown and then return" (2 Sam. 10, 5). In one of Shakespeare's drama 'Much Ado About Nothing' a lady character says, "I could not endure a husband with a beard on his face: I had rather lie in the woollen".

When I was thinking about writing an article about the controversy about beard, a friend narrated to me a conversation between two collegians. A bearded collegian was persuading his friend to keep a beard. At a heated point of their dispute on beard the clean-shaven friend retorted, "only a man who has doubts about his masculinity needs to persuade others to keep a beard". That was the end of their talk about beard.

We need not enter into a dispute about beard. But we can talk on the controversy created recently about a teenage boy's insistence on sporting beard against the discipline of his school. According to the reports flashed on many newspapers across India, a Muslim boy, Muhammad Salim wanted to keep his beard against the discipline of his Nirmala Convent Higher School at Sironj in M.P.

The Muslim boy wanted to keep his beard as an essential part of his Islamic faith against the discipline of Nirmala Convent School. The school took disciplinary action and dismissed the boy. The case was heard first by the high court in M.P. and then by the Supreme Court at New Delhi.

And the case created much controversy. Interested parties and publicity-hungry newspapers wrote about the case that it became national news.

When I read about the case in different national newspapers, I recalled a personal experience of my college days. I joined St. Xavier's College at Ahmedabad in 1968. At that time the Principal of the college Fr. Hurbert D'Souza, SJ and other Jesuit Fathers teaching in the college used to wear big white flowing dress called cassock. As a candidate for priesthood and member of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) which runs the college, I also put on a cassock and attended the class.

Since I dressed like the principal and other Fathers in the college my classmates associated me with the management of the college and they discreetly kept me at a safe distance from their friendship circle. But on the second year I was allowed to wear shirt and a pair of pants like other students in the college. The ice was broken. The friendship circle of fellow collegians were open to me and I was able to mix with them and was welcomed as one of them. Thus while getting the intellectual knowledge I was also able to get what I call the peer group formation in my college education.

In this context I recall an unpleasant thing of otherwise very memorable experience of a creative writing workshop at Arts and Commerce College at Kankanpur near Godhra. I was a member of a team of four writers of Gujarati Lekhak Mandal (Writers' Association) which conducted the workshop for 36 interested boys and girls of the college. Among the participants there were 3 Muslim boys. Their beards, caps and dresses set them apart from the rest of the students. In the two-day workshop the Muslim boys had to take a break for Namaj at Friday noon.

But the most upsetting thing was the Muslim boys, talented like the rest, were keeping to themselves without mingling and interacting with the other 33 students! So I hinted in the class on news coverage and reporting that they as students and classmates should mix with each other without any distinction of caste, creed and any other differences in their background. Intermingling all classmates will help to profit in their college life.

I believe that if the 3 Muslim students dressed like their classmates and came to college clean-shaven, then it would be easy for them to mingle with their fellow students. Observing those things which made the 3 Muslim students to stand apart another writer in the workshop said: "I hope that their aloofness now in the college would not lead them astray in the future to become communal fanatics or religion terrorists!"

We all know that many Muslim elders and even youth sport a beard. They believe that the beard is the symbol of their religious faith. But we also see many true Muslims who do not sport beards. To my knowledge no Muslim is held a non-Muslim or a Kafer or an anti-Muslim for not sporting a beard. Knowledgeable people say that there is no mention of beard in the Quran.

But the Muslim boy Muhammad Salim whose case reached the Supreme Court argued that keeping beard is a symbol of his Muslim religious identity and as such is part of his fundamental rights as the secular Constitution of India guaranteed full religious freedom to its citizens. The advocate of the boy, a retired judge, Mr. B. A. Khan argued in the Supreme Court that keeping beard is compulsory in Islam. The judge observed that the advocate, himself a Muslim, did not sport a beard but was clean-shaven.

Both the high court and the Supreme Court considered the case of the beard and gave judgement in favour of the Nirmala Convent Higher Secondary School.

Here it is not a question of who won the case in the High Court and in the Supreme Court. The question is who took the case to the courts or who persuaded the boy to take his case to High Court and Supreme Court? Were their sufficient attempts and dialogue between the boy and his party and the school management? Was their any negligence on the part of the management to look for an amicable solution before the case went to the court?

The reports which appeared in different newspapers and other media show that there were attempts by interested parties to fish in the troubled waters. In stead of seeing the case in its true perspective, interested parties and self-seekers made it a controversial issue. They tried to defame the school management and the Christian religion. More over some reporters and newspapers even tried to make it a communal issue!

But fortunately, a sense of responsibility, rule of the law and discipline prevailed and the school management did not fall into the net of the trouble makers. The leaders on both sides seem to have taken to a path of peace and of inter-religious harmony. The Christian school continues to serve good many Muslim students. But the attempts of the school management and some Muslim elders to solve such problems through dialogue and other peaceful means show that both the Christian and the Islamic religions are neither communal nor fanatic. But there are communal elements in the society! According to latest report the student Salim, the son of a vegetable Venter has submitted a petition in the Supreme Court to review its judgement through counsel Abdul Karim Ansari. (contact the author: [ciss@satyam.net.in](mailto:ciss@satyam.net.in))

#

(Last Changed : 01-07-2009)

(Next Change : 16-07-2009)

Fr. Varghese Paul © Copyright 2009