

## **AN ATHEIST'S VIEW OF LIFE**

### **Fr. Varghese Paul, S.J.**

Some time back in August 2009 I got a letter from my atheist friend Dr. Neerav Patel. In his letter Dr. Patel recalled, "Some days back I wrote a letter to the editor of DALIT VOICE and inter alia expressed my preference for Christianity in the hypothetical situation where a fanatic dictator asks me to choose a religion in lieu of my life." Obviously my friend is certainly impressed by the Christianity. But in choosing the Christian religions in a life-threatening situation my friend has neither any special love for Christianity nor does he believe that Christian religion is best suitable for him.

I believe that Neeravbhai does not have any firm faith or conviction about Christian religion. But he holds that his life is most precious to him more than death or any religion. Certainly my atheist friend upholds the supreme importance of his life. His life is the greatest thing for him. Life is everything for him.

It is crystal clear that for my atheist friend there is nothing greater than his precious life. But what is this life, after all? To me my life is the most precious gift of God. Giving me human life God the Father has made me his dearest child. I believe as true the saying of Prophet Jeremiah for me as well as every human person: "I chose you before I gave you life, and before you were born I selected you" (Jeremiah 1, 5).

My atheist friend Neeravbhai does not have the benefit of my faith, my unshakable trust in God. Intellectually brilliant Neeravbhai is a rationalist. So, first of all, let me try to understand life intellectually. We need to face a basic question to understand rationally the human life: Where do we get our precious life? What is the source of human life, or for that matter, the source of any life any existing thing? In other words, who is our creator?

We can simplistically say that we get our lives from our parents. But when we think rationally we know that our parents alone cannot give us our lives. If it is left to the parents alone to give life to their children, then, there would not have been any childless parents in the whole world. All parents would have had boys or girls of their choice. But what is the true reality? We have among us husbands and wives who do not have any children in spite of doing all they can to beget their own children. In their mad desire for a son there are parents who have aborted female fetuses and still remain without a male child! So we have to accept the fact that our parents who have given us birth are not the very original source of our lives.

Here I would like to quote a famous saying of Khalil Gibran: "Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself. They come through you but not from you. And though they are with you, yet they belong not to you."

Rationally we are forced to admit that some Power beyond our parents, who have begotten us, is at work in creating us and in sustaining our lives.

In choosing Christian religion if he is forced to choose between death and a religion, Neeravbhai has given some reasons in his letter. During his college days he was staying as a paying guest in

a predominantly dalit (depressed class) labourers and mill workers area of Rakhial. There at Rakhial area he came into contact with some Christian men and women like Samuel, Suman, Rahel and Abigail. My brilliant atheist friend was impressed by the selfless love and appreciation of his Christian friends. He visited with them their churches and attended their prayer services. Then he writes in his letter to me, "I was particularly attracted by the clean and serene and friendly environment of the church precincts; I also liked the well-dressed, disciplined and amiable believers...What I liked most was everybody, even a stranger and so-called Hindu and so-called dalit like me was welcome without any discrimination."

Neeravbhai also became familiar with the teaching and the message of Jesus. When Neeravbhai and I met last time he recalled the words of Jesus which he had often read on the walls of I. P. Mission School while traveling to Gujarat college by bus: "Come to me, all of you who are tired from carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest" (Mt. 11, 28). Thus Neeravbhai felt love for his Christian friends and respect for their Christian Religion.

My friend Neeravbhai was also impressed by the Christian equality and their respect for all people in the society while the so called high caste people believed in and practiced caste system and they hated and treated with contempt the so called low caste people. Being impressed by the Christians love and equality of all people did Neeravbhai ever think about and asked a question to him: Why do these Christians live and practice so much love? In other words, what is the source of the selfless love of the Christians?

Perhaps my atheist friend never thought about such a question. But I got the answer to the question when I was a child. My elder sister started studying English in the fifth standard. One day she came home and wrote a sentence on the window frame of the room where we used to study and did our home work. The simple sentence in large capital letters read: "GOD IS LOVE". The sentence remained for years on the window. Reading it time and again the words got etched in my mind and I began to recognize and accept God as love. The sentence certainly contained a definition of God.

After coming to Gujarat during my studies of Gujarati literature at Ahmedabad, philosophy at Pune and theology at Rome I became convinced that GOD IS LOVE. According to the teaching of Christian religion there is only one God; but there are three persons in one God. The love-relationship between these three persons is a Trinitarian love of a Trinitarian God or God the Trinity. The three persons of the Trinity are God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. For the Trinity or the Trinitarian union there is a beautiful word in Gujarati: 'sachhidanand'. All the same, it is a human word, a human language to give expression to a deep mystery. So I am convinced that without faith in the Good News preached by Jesus these mysterious words and language, to use a Pauline expression, are more like "a noisy gong or a clanging bell" (1 Cor 13, 1). They are meaningless without a desire to share the love of the Trinity or in the love of the three persons of the Trinity.

Human beings are created by God with the desire to share the love which exists in the Trinity or the love between the three persons of the triune God. This is the faith of the Christian people. This faith is based and founded on the Word of God, the Bible. The first book of Bible says about the creation of the human beings: "Then God said, 'and now we will make human beings;

they will be like us and resemble us... So God created human beings, making them to be like himself. He created them male and female” (Gen 1, 26-27). God’s words quoted earlier from Prophet Jeremiah apply to every person “I chose you before I gave you life and before you were born I selected you” (Jer 1, 5).

Thus God created men and women with love in his own likeness. More over God, the Son, Jesus through his own example has taught us to walk in the path of love. Jesus says: “I love you just as the Father loves me; remain in my love... just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love” (Jn 15, 9-10).

I see that the day-to-day lives of the people like my friends Neeravbhai is filled with love and the true values of life. They give a lot of importance to love and other genuine human values. Still, I believe that they do not go deep into love and the values of life. I do not understand why they are not going deep into the heart of the matter - the origin of the human life and of genuine love! (contact the author: [ciss@satyam.net.in](mailto:ciss@satyam.net.in))

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