

Rebirth or New Life after Death?

Fr. Varghese Paul, SJ

After a long time my artist friend Vinod Ravel came to meet me. He spoke to me about his mother who is 100 years old. I spoke to him then about the 98th birthday celebration of my mother in Kerala. I shared with him my experience of going to Kerala for the 98th birthday celebration. Our conversation then turned to the topic of rebirth and new life. We conversed for about two hours and a half about rebirth and new life. Like all my Hindu brethren Vinodbhai too is a strong believer in rebirth. He said, he learned about the rebirth from his mother.

But Vinodbhai was surprised to learn from me that the Christians do not believe in rebirth but they strongly believe in new life after death. Vinodbhai as he learned from his mother a person gets rebirth according to his present life. Those who lead a good life will get good life in rebirth. People who lead good life many times will finally attain salvation. On the contrary, people who lead bad life will get inferior life in rebirth. For ordinary people the cycle of birth and rebirth will continue.

Christians' believe in new life after death is based on the Bible. For the rationalists and few other atheist people death is the final end of life. Such people break down at the death of their dear and near ones and experience terrible hopelessness of life. But the Christians find consolation and hope because of their belief in new life after death. The faith and hope of new life is a foundation of Christians' deep faith in Jesus. The Christians in creed proclaim "We believe in the forgiveness of sins and the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting". Hence in burying the dead bodies or disposing the bodies in other ways Christians do it with great respect. Lord Jesus has overcome death through his own death on the Cross and resurrection and thus prepared the way of new life for all people.

So in the burial ritual the Christian priest prays, "Loving and merciful God, The old order has passed away: welcome him (her) now into paradise where there will be no more sorrow, nor more weeping or pain, but only peace and joy with Jesus"

Death is a sure fact for every person born on the face of the earth. For, Bible in the first book of Genesis says, the first parents broke the law of God and consequently became the victim of death. (see Gen 3:1-21). The same thing is repeated in the New Testament in the letter of St. Paul to the Romans, "Sin came to the world through one man, and his sin brought death with it. As a result, death has spread to the whole human race because everyone has sinned." (Rom 5:12)

In other words men and women broke the commandments of God and sinned and invited death. On the other hand Lord Jesus submitting himself completely to his God, the Father and embraced death on the Cross and overcame death through the resurrection. So death is not an end. But only the entrance door to eternal new life.

Now people compare death to sleep. Lord Jesus at the request of the chief of the synagogue reaches the house of Jairus. Jesus saw in Jairus' house the confusion and heard loud crying and wailing. He went in and said to them, "Why all this confusion? Why are you crying? The child is

not dead - she is only sleeping!"

"They laughed at him, so he put them all out, took the child's father and mother and his three disciples, and went into the room where the child was lying. He took her by the hand and said to her, 'Talitha koum', which means 'Little girl, I tell you to get up!'" (Mk 5: 39-40)

Similarly when Jesus received the news of the death of Lazarus he told his disciple "our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I will go and wake him up" (Jn 11: 11). In the same occasion Lazarus sister Martha acknowledged her faith in Jesus saying, "I know that my brother will rise to life on the last day."

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life, whoever believes in me will live, even though he dies: and whoever lives and believes in me will never die, do you believe this?" (Jn 11: 24-25). On the 4th day of Lazarus death Jesus and his followers reached in front of the cave in which Lazarus was buried. Jesus ordered the stone covering the cave to be moved away. Then praying to God the Father, Jesus called out in a loud voice 'Lazarus, Come Out' and the dead man came out with new life. (see Jn 11: 33-43)

The Christians believe that when a person dies there is a just judgment. In the judgment person who has died with God's grace receives God's merciful forgiveness and is received into God's presence in the company of all the saints. And those who refuse God's grace and has committed deadly sins receives eternal punishment. And there may be person at the time of death has not received complete forgiveness and has not committed any deadly sins. Such person is purified in the purgatory, a state of spiritual cleansing in purifying fire.

As a proof of last judgment at death we have Jesus, while hanging on the Cross between two criminals, says to the repentant criminal, "I promise you that today you will be in Paradise with me". (Lk 23: 43) On the other hand Jesus has spoken about eternal damnation for those who die in deadly sin (see Mt 25: 41). Again Jesus has spoken about the poor Lazarus with Abraham and the rich man suffering in eternal fire (see Lk 16: 23)

But a Christian who trusts in the unconditional mercy of God, believes in the Just God. So the Christians do not condemn anybody being punished with eternal damnation. On the other hand the Christian religions after due process and of studying and making sure that a person who has lived and died in the state of grace of God may be declared a Saint. For instance, Mother Teresa died in 1997 and 18 years of examining her life in all their aspects was declared a Saint on Sept. 4, 2016. The Christians believe such saints are with God. So Christian prays to God, through the intercession of such saints and asks their help. Besides Christians strongly believe that they can help through prayers, sacrifices and good works those souls in the purgatory.

A person after death changes the living abode receiving new form of life. But the eternal new life begins while a person is living here on earth. So with the hope of new life a person should not neglect the present life; on the contrary, the person is called to lead a full life here on earth living happily and joyfully. St Paul who was in the fore front of proclaiming of Jesus' message says in his letter to the Philippines, "May you always be joyful in your union with the Lord. I say it again: rejoice! Show a gentle attitude towards everyone." (Phi 4: 4-5).

In our life in this world and also in the life to come there is a way to live happily. That way is a total renunciation of selfishness and positively living for others. If we live loving those who cross our paths more than we love ourselves and serving them selflessly, we can assure happy life here and now, and eternal happiness in resurrected new life after death.

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