

A brief Exposition of Spirituality in Zoroastrianism

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Spirituality takes different forms in different religious philosophies. Almost all religions emphasize the need for good deeds but some may prescribe certain pre-requisites such as believing in the prophet as Savior or the Son of God, or believing him to be the sole legitimate prophet on earth, or believing in the theory of reincarnation, or in a God involved in the history of survival of a particular race. In Zoroastrianism, while a belief in Zoroaster as a prophet is self-evident, what is crucial in attaining spirituality is applying his teachings in actual practice. It is not surprising therefore, that the name often used for Zoroastrianism in Avesta and Pahlavi is the Good Religion or the Mazdayasni (One-God-Worshipping) Religion. What then are Zoroaster's teachings for attaining spirituality?

Zoroaster's Teachings on Attaining Spirituality

I, for one, find a very short and sweet answer to this question in the very words of our prophet as so well expressed contained in Yasna 34.1:

“Let us fully emulate the ways of Lord Ahura Mazda, the way he himself has attained immortality, Asha, Good Rule and Perfection. Let us fully realize them in our own being and in our own life in full measure.”

The same sentiment is explained in the beginning stanza of Spentomaiti Gatha (Yasna 47.1) but here in one stanza, as nowhere else in the Gathas, all the seven Amesha Spentas are mentioned along with Spenta Mainyu, the Beneficent Spirit or Godly Mentality. Of all the religions of the world, only Zoroastrianism, in addition to coining a name for the All Knowing God, Ahura Mazda – perhaps the first time in the history of mankind, also delineates seven attributes of Ahura Mazda called Amesha Spentas, Beneficent Immortals. As enough has already been written about these seven attributes and their corresponding material representation on earth, they are only briefly described below:

Ahura Mazda- All Knowing Creator of Life – Man.

Vohu Mana- Good Mind – Cattle.

Asha Vahishta – Best (utmost) righteousness – Fire, Energy.

Khshathra Vairya – Desirable Kingdom – Metal (sky, environment).

Spenta Armaiti – Beneficent Right Mentality – Earth, ecology.

Haurwataat – Perfection – Water.

Ameretaat – Immortality – Plants, Vegetation.

The message is thus very simple: when we acquire all these splendid seven spiritual spheres of Ahura Mazda fully in our being and practice them fully and unceasingly, we attain God's own Beneficent Spirit (Spenta Mainyu) and become Godlike. This also

entails not only taking good care of elements of nature represented by the seven Amesha Spentas, but also furthering and improving them, as so intensely advised in Yasna 30.9:

“Let us be those who bring about the renovation (Frashokereti) of the world by our actions.”

Science, as long as it remains a handmaid of good causes and leads to Spenta (Beneficent) progress is not antithetical to religion in Zoroastrianism. Thus Samuel Laing could declare in the nineteenth century that a Zoroastrian’s faith is not compromised in any way by various discoveries of science. As long as science is employed for the cause of good (Spenta) and not evil (Angra), it only contributes to the advancement of **Frashokereti**, which literally means making (the creation) fresh or excellent.

Thus the reason Asho Zaratushtra assigned a prominent place to Amesha Spenta in his theology becomes apparent – it was to highlight the majesty of Ahura Mazda as well as to delineate in as simple terms as possible for his pre-historic times a way to attain spirituality in its seven-fold splendor.

Seven thus became a sacred figure and all basic rituals represented seven Amesha Spentas and thereby the seven elements of nature manifested by them. For instance, in a Jashan or Yasna ceremony, Ahura Mazda is represented by man, Vohu Mana by milk, Asha Vahishta by fire, Khshathra Vairya by metal like the fire-urn, Spenta Armaiti by the earth or the stone stool the priest sits on, Haurvataat by water and Ameretaat by plant products. As the corporeal or physical (Getig) world was conceived by Ahura Mazda in the spiritual (Menog) world as per our scriptures, it is natural that every thing in this world eternally possesses the divine essence of Ahura Mazda and Amesha Spentas. But human beings are endowed from the very beginning of the world with free will (Yasna 31.11) and advised to make the right choice again and again in the Gathas, particularly in Yasna 30 and 45.

The evil is created not by Ahura Mazda but by the wrong use of free will made by humans by making bad choices endangering and compromising the existence.

Mankind’s task is to ensure that ultimately this physical existence is cleansed of all evil generating from the ungodly choices made by humans and restore it fully to the pristine condition in which Ahura Mazda created it and thereby leading it to Perfection/Resurrection (Frashokereti) in every way – Yasna 30.9, etc. Such a theology could have vast appeal.

Indeed, as Peter Brown noted long ago: “The Christian Church had inherited through late Judaism, that most faithful legacy of Zoroastrian Persia to the western world – a belief in the absolute division of the spiritual world between good and evil powers, between angels and demons.” (The World of Late Antiquity AD 150-750, W.W. Norton and Company, New York, 1959).

The Robust Importance of the Physical World for the Attainment of Spirituality

The souls coming down from the spiritual (Menog) to the material (Getig) world do not in any way constitute a fall as in Christianity or Manichaeism but signifies completion of Ahura Mazda's plan for us. Actually, the Getig world is better than the Menog world since it is in the Getig world that the Menog creation got an opportunity to receive tangible and sentient form. However, the Getig world is open to assault from evil in all forms since man's primary mission on this earth is to fight evil. It is for this reason that Fravardin Yasht (Yasht 13.17) acclaims that the Fravashi of the living person is generally the strongest.

A Zoroastrian therefore does not have to look elsewhere to seek spirituality : benefiting and improving all the creations and creatures of Ahura Mazda and devoting all our energies and intellectual faculties for the rightful, timely, well-done deeds and developing skills of every kind, knowledge and progress where there was none (Visperad 15.1) is a Zoroastrian's mission on this earth. Restoring it to the original, perfect condition created by Ahura Mazda by fighting evil every step of the way is the path to obtaining spirituality for us.

The prophet makes is very clear that "This truth applies equally to men as well as woman." (Yasna 53.6). Women, thus have equal opportunity to attain spirituality and salvation as man. It is not surprising to find, therefore, that the Avestan word Mazda has a feminine base and three of the six Amesha Spentas are feminine. The door to spirituality is thus open to both genders and it leads us right to the world and people around us - the opportunity is this right where we happen to be and whenever and wherever we are placed by Ahura Mazda on this earth. We are but His Hamkaars (collaborators) living and breathing for Him and His creations, having our being and mooring in Him so we can expend all our physical and mental faculties we can for improving this world in any way, big or small, we can.

Learning trades and new skills, pursuing education of every kind, keeping ourselves physically fit to serve our family, town and country, actively opposing the evil and evil doers, working hard to raise a family with many children and educate them in the ways of Ahura Mazda, taking care of the weak and the sick around us, honoring God, parents and (good) rules and rulers of society, participating in religious ceremonies, communal events such as Gahambars and contributing his/her share for them, observing purity in every way so as to avoid unnecessary illness and infection, improving God's creations in every way we can and spreading its knowledge everywhere so others can benefit by it, spreading knowledge about the Good Religion and observing it faithfully in our own life, not polluting any creation of Ahura Mazda in life or death, making sure our good thoughts, words and deeds far outweigh bad thoughts words and deeds, thereby ensuring a place for us in paradise. These are but a few examples. Even the Achaemenians 2500 years ago had insufficient knowledge of the Avesta but they faithfully carried out its injunctions. For instance the aqueducts and underground water canals (Quanaats) they skillfully made to make the arid land fertile are still visible. So is the canal they made to join the Nile with the Red Sea. Even the burial places of the kings carved out from rocks

pollutes nothing. Forestation and preservation of nature and animals they provided in their paradise, which was so heavenly it became a word for heaven itself, is another example.

However, even more amazing is the phenomenon that the Parsis of early nineteenth century did not know the meaning of the Avesta and its exhortations and yet they splendidly, faithfully, and zealously carried them out in every way they can as soon as they got the opportunity to do so. They devoted their effort not only to the technological and industrial development of the nation, but also to social causes, protection of the environment, emancipation of women, etc. Examples - ensuring fairness to the labor force and starting labor movements to ensure it even on the face of opposition by the British and that too by an aristocratic guy (Mr. B.P. Wadia), fighting the British brutality such as Jalianwala Baag and that too spearheaded by the daughter of a Parsi baronet (Bapsy Sabawala), starting the independence movement in India as also laying the superstructure for its economic viability, openly rioting against the British in the streets of Bombay in the nineteenth century when it tried to get rid of stray dogs despite their otherwise amiable relations with them, fighting hard for the freedom of India by a tenacious wealthy Zoroastrian lady, (Madame Bhikhaiji Cama, 1851-1936) even when expelled from India, starting innumerable communal and cosmopolitan charities, schools, colleges, hospitals, education scholarships, art galleries, orphanages, wells, aquariums, animal shelters, etc. In other words these Zoroastrians left the world much better than they found it – in whichever way they could as God’s allies – Hamkaar. Surprisingly, I came across a further validation of these observations in an article by William Pfaff in Chicago Tribune (August 12, 1997, Section 1, p. 11):

“In India pre-Independence capitalism and industrialism developed chiefly in the Parsee community, Zoroastrians of Persian origin, who take a robust view of the struggle of good with evil and believe in individual human responsibility.” He concludes: “The inherited values of a society do shape its modern practices, but in far more complicated ways than most present discussion acknowledges.”

The Iranian Zoroastrians did the same as soon as they got the chance to do so, even though unfortunately they always had to labor under many restraints. The evidence of the munificence of Arbab Rustam Guiv and Zartoshti brothers is evident today in Iran, India, UK, Australia and of course all over North America.

It seems it did not matter that they did not know the Avestan language, because the religion had become a living tradition and was practiced faithfully to this day. For instance, there are so many Zoroastrian environmentalists even today who are not aware of what the Avesta says about the environment and ecology but are instinctively driven to protecting it at the risk of personal peril. Similarly, the efforts of Behramji Mabari (1853-1912) for the emancipation of Hindu women met strong resentment from the Indian nationalist leader Tilak who could not wait to avenge himself by faulting Malbari’s reformist zeal for not fighting for the acceptance of late JRD Tata’s French mother in his own Parsi fold.

The Iranian epic, Shahnameh, written by a Muslim poet, Firdausi Tusi, represents the Zoroastrian's constant struggle against evil. And even in our own times, The Times of India in its editorial on July 15, 1984 salutes the Parsis for their deep commitment for moral values: "Think of a half a dozen leading dissidents who have stood their ground whatever the temptations, blandishments and pressures and if you like you can pick all six from among the Zoroastrians. It is a truly extraordinary phenomenon," more so if you compare the total number of Zoroastrians as under 100,000 compared to one billion population of India.

Books have been written on their accomplishments but even the most comprehensible one on this subject, Eckhard Kulke's, "The Parsis in India – A minority as an Agent of Social Change," 1974, Bombay – could not do full justice to it. Their achievement in various spheres could only be described as a in-born inclination, embedded in their religious archetype, towards constantly working for Frashokereti, a view which Kulke also holds. Duschene Guillemin, a great scholar of Zoroastrianism of our times, also attributes it to "their religious commandments" and describes Zoroastrianism as the religion of symbols – symbols which kept the religion and its message alive among the followers for millennia. For instance, the symbol of Sudreh-Kusti embodies the essential principles of Zoroastrianism.

The Way to the Other World is Through This World

Thus, for a Zoroastrian the path to the other world is through this very world – by being Ahura Mazda's co-worker (Hamkaar) in every way on this earth, making his creation Spenta (progressive/beneficent) and fighting Angra (evil) in every way and by realizing in one's own life all the attributes of the seven Amesha Spentas as best as one can. We will be judged in the other world by what we do for Ahura Mazda in this world while alive. The divine essence of Ahura Mazda lies in everyone as well as in everything good on this earth and the way to the other world is through incorporating it within our being while alive as well as promoting and perfecting it within us as well as all around us. Spiritual salvation is thus not far away for a Zoroastrian as the opportunity for it lies just where we find ourselves in life at a given time and clime. As the Hoshbaam Prayer tells us, we can become one (or friend) with Ahura Mazda by observing Asha Vahishta (Best Truth) as best as we can in our life and hereby removing all the (Angra) qualities lurking in us and around us. God has never forsaken us after creating this world but is dwelling in everything and everyone around us if we only care to recognize it and use our free will to side with him and help Him to bring about Frashokereti when only the eternal life and goodness will prevail on earth.

Thus, Ahura Mazda's reason for casting the material world in the mold of the spiritual world seems to be to ensure the spiritual sanctity and significance of this visible world as well as to ensure that His grace is evident every where in, the universe. His Holy Spirit, Spenta Mainyu, permanently permeates the physical world, and cosmic consciousness, (Vohu Mana) and cosmic energy and light (Asha Vahishta) sustain and guide it eternally.

Gathic Way to Spirituality

The divine intelligence/truth/Asha as represented by Asha Vahishta pervades the universe and therefore the prophet says: “Yes indeed I have already come to know Thee O Mazda! as Spenta when thou didst come to me with Vohu Mana. My response to Thy inquiry, “Whom did thou wish to worship?” was: ‘Thy fire. As long as I have the ability to choose (or wish) I will bow to Asha with reverence as my gift.’” (Yasna 43.9). Later on, that led to carrying a piece of wood to fire as a gift.

Yasna 43.9 should be read in conjunction with Yasna 30.1 where Asho Zarathushtra sings praise of Ahura Mazda, Vohu Mana and Asha “so that one may attain the vision (Sanskrit-Darshan) of perfection in the realm of light.” The Gathas are generally free of mysticism but this verse is regarded by many scholars, particularly by G. Gnolli, as indicative of mysticism. It is noteworthy that it centers on light, a dimension of divine energy/fire. This reminds me of what one Jewish friend turned Christian wrote to me on May 31, 1995: “One of my major life goals was to see the sacred fire of the Parsis. When I finally did, my old mystical life was literally rekindled. I was surprised, because I did not expect the Zoroastrian fire to have such a direct and powerful spiritual influence on me. I had assumed that any mystical experience would be routed through Christianity alone. But I was wrong: The Lord does what He/She wills, despite the lines that we people draw to contain Him/Her.”

Yasna 31.7 elucidates how the whole universe emanates with divine light which manifests itself through Vohu Mana and Asha since Ahura Mazda here says he is their creator. Yasna 34.15 (it is recited four times – which demonstrates its significance) compliments Yasna 34.1, as well as delineates the importance of following the best (Godly) advise and deeds mentioned in Yasna 31.11 and expresses God’s wish that we establish His Kingdom on this earth with Vohu Mana(good mind) and Asha (righteousness) by making the world fresh (by working for Frashokereti) and full of truth. Thus, just as God wants us to make this world as spiritual as He made it in the beginning (Yasna 28.11), He also wants us to become spiritual and immortal (Amesha) by faithfully following his precepts so that we would acquire new vision, and see and fulfill His wish in everything we think, say and do, and live and breath and have our mooring in Him.

The Role of the Fravashi

The concept of Fravashi (Farohar), introduced here, is striking as the Gathas do not mention it. However, as the very meaning of the word Fravarti (Fravashi) suggests an emphasis (fra) on choosing (Var), there is little in the Gathas that can contradict it. It is the divine essence in us that has already at the primeval beginning chosen right and therefore dwells in heaven and inspires our Urvan (soul) to choose right when living on this earth. As a psychologist I am so amazed at finding important modern day psychological concepts as the very basis of Zoroastrianism from pre-historic times.

According to Yasna 55.1 (a part of the later Avesta, not a part of the Gathas), humans do not just have bodies but have nine constituents in all as detailed below: three physical, three astral, and three purely spiritual:

1. Gaetha: Matter or material elements.
2. Tanu: Human body the physical frame.
3. Azdi: bones or bony substances.
4. Ushtana: Breath, the link between body and mind.
5. Kehrpa: Astral or ethereal.
6. Tevishi: The subtle etheric substance reflecting our state of spirituality
7. Baodhanga: Intelligence, Id.
8. Urvana: Soul attached to each person, Ego.
9. Fravashi: The soul representing the divine essence in us and guiding our Urvana intuitively on the right path while on this earth even as it resides in heaven.

Ushtana (Sanskrit Praana) plays an important part as a link between body and mind, an idea which is explained at length in the post-Gathic Hindu philosophy and is an integral part of yoga. It must have been an equally important concept for Asho Zaratushtra, as when, for instance, he dedicates “the breath of his own body as a gift” to Mazda for the furtherance of Vohu-Mana (Good Mind) and Asha (Righteousness, Cosmic Truth) on this earth (Yasna 33.14). However, due to our unfortunate history we do not know much about it. But modern psychology too has emphasized the role of breath as a link between body and mind, and used it extensively for treatment for overcoming stress, anxiety, panic attacks, lack of confidence or self-esteem and so on. My own cassette tapes on such breathing exercises have helped many to overcome these psychological problems. Zarathushtra is thus the first person on this earth to emphasize the importance of Ushtana as a link between body and mind.

According to Freudian psychology, human consciousness involves constant interactions between Id, Ego and Superego. Id represents what our intelligence (Baodhanga) perceives and desires for itself even when it is physically, mentally, socially or spiritually not good for us. However, when our intelligence reaches a higher stage in its development process, it could become more discriminative and here the comparison may end. Urvaana could be compared to Ego which in Freudian terms helps us to tone down our raw selfish instincts and accommodate them to needs of others around us and our society, since Urvaana represents higher consciousness and is endowed with free will. Fravashi could be easily compared to Super-ego which follows the dictates of conscience and always guides us to make the right choice and is unhappy if we don't. A person in accord with his Superego or Fravashi will always do right and further the cause of Spenta Mainyu on this earth. Thus the Avesta repeatedly says: “We venerate the Urvanas of the departed who (have already graduated as) the Fravashis of the righteous.”

Concluding Remarks

We can thus see how comprehensive and yet so logical, lofty, sublime and literally so down-to-earth Zarathushtra's philosophy is about attaining spirituality and how relevant,

inspiring and practicable it is today as it was at the dawn of history. As a matter of fact, when people are turning away from religion and religious dogmas today, his theology holds promise for inspiring us to recognize and fulfill our spiritual mission so easily on this earth, a mission which is not far from our grasp if we only will it.

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