

DG McIntyre - The Core and the Externals

Every religion has two aspects – the core, which consists of its beliefs, its ideas, its way of life, and the externals, which consist of rituals, and practices.

The core of our beliefs is the teachings of Zarathushtra. And we are lucky to have his own words – the Gathas.

In the Hormazd Yasht, (not a part of the Gathas), Zarathushtra supposedly asks Ahura Mazda:

" 'What.....Holy Word is the strongest? the most glorious?.....the best healing?.....What destroys best the malice of Daevas and Men?.....What makes the material world best come to the fulfillment of its wishes?.....What frees the material world best from the anxieties of the heart?' Ahura Mazda answered: 'Our Name, O Spitama Zarathushtra! who are the Amesha-Spentas.....' " Ormazd Yasht, verses 1 through 3, Sacred Books of the East, Volume 23, pages 23 – 24, translated by James Darmesteter (Motilal Banarsidas reprint).

If we must express the teachings of Zarathushtra in a nutshell, I think it is the concept of the *amesha spenta*. In the Gathas, they are the beginning, the end, and how we get there. According to Zarathushtra, they are the essence of divinity – the attributes with which he describes God. And they are also the way to God. They are what we worship and how we worship. They are Zarathushtra's way of life and the purpose of life.

So what is the path of the *amesha spenta*.

It is that we allow the spirit of goodness (*spenta mainyu*) to inform our intelligence, that we use the resulting good mind or good thinking – not just intelligence, but intelligence committed to goodness – (*vohu mano*) to figure out what is true, and good, and right (*asha*), and bring it to life with our thoughts, words and actions (*aramaiti*). In so doing, we defeat evil, and bring about God's good rule (*vohu xshathra*) – in the Gathas, it's called the rule of truth and good thinking – all of which brings about an increase in the spirit of goodness, (*spenta mainyu*) in our world, and in our hearts and minds.

The path of the *amesha spenta* is not only the way to heaven, it is heaven itself. Zarathushtra's idea of heaven or paradise, is the state of being that occurs when we have perfected or attained completely (*haurvatat*) these divine attributes, resulting in *ameretat*, a state of non-deathness.

I agree with the unknown author of the Hormuzd Yasht. I think the path of the *amesha spenta* is the essence of what it is to be a Zarathushtrian.^[1]

Many hundreds of years ago, the Gathas were so popular that in one of the later Zoroastrian writings, we are told that if you hear someone singing the Gathas, whether along an aqueduct, or a river, or in the wilderness, or on the highways of commerce, it is perfectly all right to join in (Aerpatastan and Nirangastan, Chapter VIII, pages 83 -84 translated by S. J. Bulsara, printed by the Parsee Panchayat, 1915).[2] Today, most of us are not even aware of the unique and lovely ideas that they contain. They are dismissed as "just ethics". We have lost our focus. That is why we are having trouble interesting our youngsters in the religion. We are consumed by externals. We have forgotten the core – which is more modern than we are.

Let us turn to the externals. We know that in Zarathushtra's day, the rituals that were popular involved the slaughter of thousands of cattle. Can you imagine the amount of blood and suffering that the slaughter of even fifty – let alone a thousand – cattle would entail? A thinking person would have to be revolted by such externals. And Zarathushtra was.

In the Gathas, he does not prescribe any rituals, but he refers to the component parts of rituals – butter, milk, bread, fire – and he ties these symbols to the core concepts of his teachings. In other words, the concrete symbols he chose for externals, were benign, simple, everyday things that nourished and were important in the lives of his people. Things to which they could relate.

Today, we don't slaughter thousands of cattle, but we have forgotten his thought, that externals must express the core in a meaningful way. Our externals have become dislocated from the core, and we do some rather illogical things.

On the one hand, we are proud that ours was one of the first monotheistic religions. We worship One God. The God of the Universe. How do we square that with our exclusionary practices. Is it credible that the wise, generous, loving God of the Universe would regard the entire population of this planet as a source of spiritual pollution, except for 150,000 Zoroastrians. How can it be right to exclude any human being from the worship of the One God. You will never find such ideas expressed in the Gathas, or in any Zoroastrian text.

Over 1,000 years ago, when our ancestors did not have indoor plumbing, menstruation was understandably considered an unclean thing. This was true in many primitive societies (not just ours), because they did not understand the phenomenon. Today we know that the menses is simply the lining of the uterus which, if conception does not occur, is sloughed off. The purpose of this lining is to nourish the fetus. Does it make sense to consider something that God created to nourish the unborn child a source of spiritual pollution? Today we don't follow 90% of the taboos in the Vendidad. Why do we still follow this one? The Gathas require that we exercise intelligence in making our choices.

Following the devastation of Iran by Alexander, mistakenly called the Great, when the learned were killed or carted off to Greece as slaves, and the royal palace with its libraries was burned, knowledge of Zarathushtra's teachings in Iran understandably declined.

By the time the Sassanians came to power, more than 2,000 years after Zarathushtra, the language of the Gathas was totally unknown to the people, and was only imperfectly understood by the priests themselves.^[3]

So the Sassanian priests made up a whole bunch of prayers in a language which was then understood. They crafted the Kemna Mazda prayer by starting with two verses from the Gathas and made the rest of the prayer in a language of that day. Today we call those prayers the Khordeh Avesta. But except for the Gathic parts, the language of those prayers did not even exist in Zarathushtra's day.

There are so many aspects of our rituals that are so very beautiful. We should take the most beautiful practices from our past, and express them in today's ways to make our rituals meaningful and consistent with Zarathushtra's teachings. For example:

I love the way the priests do the "hamazor" gesture – putting their hands, one into the other's to demonstrate cooperation and friendship. It would be neat if we could build on this by having everyone present also do the hamazor gesture with everyone around them at the same time, offering friendship.

Did you know that the fire for an atash behram is a mixture of many different fires – the household fire, the fires from many different trades, a shepherd's fire, a military fire, fire from lightning, fire from a neighbor's hearth, fire from burning a corpse, and fire from burning trash (The Religious Ceremonies and Customs of the Parsees, J. J. Modi, 2d ed. 1986 reprint, pages 200 – 201). What does this tell you? It tells me that the person who invented this ritual was trying to say that the sacred comes from all aspects of life. That is so neat.

Externals are most meaningful, when they express the core.

For those who want to keep doing things the old way, that's fine too. That's their choice.

But in one respect we have to change. There is too much hatred and insult in the way we express our differences. Zarathushtra taught that the relationship between man and God is that of a friend to a friend or a beloved to a beloved. He also taught that God lives in each one of us.

If our beloved Friend lives in each one of us, are we not all part of the same Whole?

Can we harm any person without harming Him and ourselves? Think about it.

[1] Parenthetically, note the use of the word "best" in the above quotation from the Hormuzd Yasht. It echoes the many-layered meanings which Zarathushtra ascribes to this word in the Gathas (see Of Means and Ends, a paper given at the WZO Colloquium on the Gathas in 1993). It indicates to me that the author of this Yasht was probably aware of the way Zarathushtra used this word in the Gathas.

[2] I am indebted to Dr. Jafarey for providing me with a photocopy of this excerpt from this text, when I could not locate the reference.

[3] I am indebted to Farrokh Vajifdar for providing me with a translation of the first part of Arda Viraz Namag (as translated by Fereydun Vahman, which says (as quoted to me by Farrokh): "Thus it is said that once the righteous Zardusht had spread in the world the religion he [had] received.Then the accursed Evil Spirit, the sinful, in order to make men doubtful of this religion, misled the accursed Alexander the Roman (who) took away and burnt those scriptures, namely all the Avesta and Zand which had been written with gold water (liqueted gold) on prepared cowhide, and deposited in Stakhr i Pabagan [south-west Iran] in the Fortress of Writing. He killed many of the high priests and the judges and Herbads and Mobads and the upholders of the religion and the able ones and the wise men of Iran." Farrokh is of the opinion that the original Arda Viraz Namag may have been written in Parthian times.