

The Universal Appeal of the Message of Zarathushtra

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Webster dictionary defines the word “universal” as “Used, intended to be used, or understood by all”. I have no doubt whatsoever in my mind that Asho Zarathushtra had intended that his religion should spread among all the seven continents, just as our Nyaeshes and Yashts often proclaim in their concluding paragraph. However, the organizers of this Congress want me to focus on how relevant the religion of Asho Zarathushtra is today in our own times and for our own children.

From the prehistoric times in which Asho Zarathushtra proclaimed his prophetic vision to our own times on this North American continent is an incredibly long time. Nobody has yet been able to figure out with certainty how long ago Asho Zarathushtra preached his religion. But we know today that Zarathushtrian civilization is second in antiquity only to the ancient Babylonian and Sumerian civilizations which have long, long been extinct. We are the only people mentioned in the Bible that happen to still be around. One would, therefore, find it so hard to believe that despite its hoary past, the message of Asho Zarathushtra is as relevant to our own times as it was in his. I want very humbly, but very ardently to emphasize that **THE** most important teaching of Asho Zarathushtra is very highly relevant to our own times, and that perhaps humanity is in greater need of it than ever before. This most important core of Asho Zarathushtra’s message is that men as well as women carry within themselves a distinct possibility of being made of the same divine essence, and in the same divine mould as God himself and that our mission on this earth is to realize this divinity in ourselves and HAMEN THWA HAKHMA- be forever submerged with the Lord (Hoshbam) or as Y (Yasna) 50.9 describes it, be in the footing of the blessed one. In those dark ages when man’s worship (Y 34.5, 33.6, 32.12, 44.20, 46.1, 49.1, and 29.1-9) of god was based upon fear and superstition, Asho Zarathushtra had the vision and the courage to declare that we can only serve God by being god-like, trying to follow his own qualities. These are Vohu Mana – Good Thinking, Asha Vahishta – Supreme Truth, Vohu Khshathra – Good Dominion, obtained by choosing Good Mind and Truth (Y 51.1-5 and 16-20), Spenta Armaiti (satchitananda of the Vendatas) – Divine Bliss/Serenity realized by the following the above god-like attributes (Y 51.21 50:4), which in turn leads one to Haurvatat – Perfection, and Ameretat – the state of Immortal Bliss (Y 45.7, 45.10, 46-16, 51-7, and 51.22). Nowhere is this idea so explicitly stated as in Y 34.1: “By whichever action, by whichever word, by whichever worship, O wise one, Thou didst receive for Thyself immortality, truth and good dominion

and completeness, let these very things be given by us to thee O Lord, in the very greatest number.” Man can realize the divinity in himself by following Asho Zarathushtra’s precepts and finally himself become worthy of adoration (Y 51.22). “Such a person, by reason of his virtuous conception, is an ally, a brother, or a father (of thee), Wise Lord” according to Y 45.11. Regarding such a virtuous man as not only an ally, but also as a brother and father of Ahura Mazda speaks volumes for Asho Zarathushtra’s unprecedented emphasis on the importance and dignity of man. Any man or woman who acts according to the dictates of his or her virtuous spirit is, himself or herself, of the very nature of God, himself or herself.

Never before in the history of mankind have men been faced with temptations at every turn as they are in our own times. The younger generation is exposed to so many temptations that it is much more easy for them to go wrong than was the case with us. For instance, while our older generation had no opportunity to watch television, our children have the choice of watching so many television channels. They are exposed to alcohol, drugs, violence, immortality, etc. as no other generation has been. The hold of parental, communal, religious and social structures is loosening and there is so much emphasis today on individual rights and individual choice. Our children’s future will therefore depend on whether they can make the right choice for every critical cause facing them. This is exactly what Asho Zarathushtra expects us to do (Y 30-45). What he said in Y 30.2 thousands of years ago sounds so contemporary, so modern: “Listen to the best things with your ears and reflect on them with the light of your mind. Then each man and woman, for himself or herself, has to choose between the two (between the right way and the lie). Awaken to this doctrine before the Great Event of choice ushers in.” As Victor Frankl asserts in his book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*: “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing – the last of the human freedoms, to choose one’s own attitude in any given set of circumstances; to choose one’s own way”. This is what Asho Zarathushtra acknowledges readily in Y 45.9: “*Ye Ne Usen Choret Spencha Aspencha*” – “He left it to our Will” to choose between “the Virtuous and the Unvirtuous” or between “Progress and Regress”. Asho Zarathushtra perceives life as a constant battle within the soul of man for choosing between good and evil. The evil he wants us to fight is within us and not outside of us. Our choice becomes the most crucial and constant factor of life and it is this very choice which allows us to align ourselves with God in every way. Our choice is a key to unlocking the gates of blissful existence. By aligning ourselves with God, by making the right choice at every turn, we can become godlike ourselves.

It is so inconceivable that thousands of years ago Asho Zarathushtra went out of his way to make it explicitly clear that his message applies equally to men and to women (Y 53.6).

The Gathas appeal to me only because of their lofty vision of God but also because of their timelessness and eternal verity. They maintain this quality while rituals and religious observances may vary from time to time. A Pahlavi book, *Shayast La Shayast*, predicts that a time will come in which it will be virtually impossible to observe all our customs and traditions. For us in North America that time has already arrived. Even in India or in Iran the most orthodox Zoroastrians cannot claim to observe all the customs and traditions exactly. I, for one, used to be as orthodox as one can get at a very early age. Every time I visit India the priests complain about how difficult it is becoming to observe past practices. What was unthinkable and impermissible for the priests themselves just a few years ago is becoming common and acceptable now. I am not suggesting that we do away with traditions, but if Asho Zarathushtra were to address this congress, he would certainly exhort us not to get discouraged by this scenario and to guide ourselves by the eternal principles he expounded in his Gathas. Indeed, none of the present practices and traditions, including the fire temples themselves, existed in Asho Zarathushtra's own time except perhaps for the Navjote or a similar type of initiation ceremony to accept the converts into his fold.

Asho Zarathushtra's spiritual insight led him to the discovery that the most important principles governing human life and the universe actually reside in a single God and not in a pantheon of many different gods. Similarly, in his Gathas he reveals and emphasizes that the potential for attaining full divine stature can exist within the single man or woman who imbibes God's qualities within themselves. This is the basis for his "ethical monotheism", which Professor Stanley Insler regards as "his extraordinary religious contribution". "But", he adds, "because the prophet arose at the dawn of Iranian religion, so to speak, his profound and penetrative grasp that the same principles could drive both the human and the divine spheres of life did not receive the resonance it merited" (Abstract levels of Ritual in the Gathas of Zarathushtra, p. 20). Better, I would say, now late than never. The medieval ages could perhaps not lend themselves well toward a full understanding of this highly abstract philosophy of Asho Zarathushtra. But today we are able to understand the Gathas better than ever before since his own times. Therefore, "May we be among those who make this life fresh" with the divine message of Asho Zarathushtra (Y 30.9).

I would like to conclude with the wise words of Professor James Russell of Columbia University: "It is because of these original declarations, possibly the most momentous in human culture (for it is from them that the noblest ethical systems and concepts of human rights and law seem to bear their imprint), that Zarathushtra should be called by all good men OUR prophet" (*Ushta*, viii (4), Dec. 1988, p. 4). Should not we therefore proudly say, as we say at the beginning of all our prayers, FRAVARANE MAZDA YASNO ZARATHUSHTRISH-I openly choose to be the follower of Asho Zarathushtra!