

God's Expression of Love for Man

Making Man a Central Concern of the Gathas

Gathas weave theology in such a harmonious way that God, Godliness, man's spirituality, this world, after-life and even the end of the world, all become part of a unified theory. The afterlife thus rests on what we do in this life. This world is as sacred as the other world and once we are here, we have to devote all our energies to improve what we can, in our own humble way as our spiritual fulfillment and mission on earth. This makes man very important in the Gathic theology.

By Kersey H. Antia Orland park, Illinois¹

MAN AND WOMAN AS GOD'S COLLABORATORS ON THIS EARTH

I learned all the Gathas by rote by the time I was ten. But I hardly knew their meaning or importance till much later. I vividly remember though, Dasturji Dabu explaining to us in the Religion class, at the M. F. Cama Atharvan Institute, the coming of Asho Zarathushtra on this earth as per Yasna 29 when I was about that age. Perhaps, my first acquaintance with the meaning of any one Gathic verse came about the same time when I heard Dr. Gilder, the then Prohibition Minister and a personal physician of Gandhiji, quoting Yasna 34.15 while presiding over Dasturji Dhalla's lecture in C. J. Hall in Bombay. I looked up its translation and I liked it so much, that it has been in my prayers ever since:

O Mazda! Reveal me the best words and actions – those that are of the essence of *Vohu Manah* (good mind) and *Asha* (Cosmic Law of Order and Righteousness) so that they form the just basis for my devotional hymns (for you).

As this verse comes at the very end of the Ahunavaiti Gatha [Yasna 28-34] one comes to realize in this verse the essence of this Gatha:

O Ahura! With thy Divine Sovereignty (*Khshathra*) Thou shalt certainly bring about *Frashokereti* (Renovation of the World) to fulfill our ardent striving (for the same).

Much later in life I realized the beautiful significance of Yasna 34.1:

¹ Copyright © 1998 by Kersey H. Antia. First published in *FEZANA Journal*, Spring 1998, pp. 47-50.

By whatever deed, by whatever speech, by whatever prayer, O Mazda! Thou didst attain for Thyself (Thy Divine Attributes of) *Ameretat* (Immortality), *Asha*, *Khshathra*, and *Haurvatat* (Perfection), (kindly) enable us to render these very attributes to Thee, O Ahura, in the fullest measure (so we become like Thee and help Thee bring about Frashokereti as best as we can)."

St. Augustine echoed this same idea millennia later when he talked about humans being molded in God's image and their heart not resting till they rest in Him.

The Gathic emphasis in the role of (WO)/MAN as God's collaborator (*Hamkar*) on this earth, just as the Amesha Spentas are Mazda's Hamkar, has never ceased to impress me, especially as it comes down to us from pre-historic days. God loves us so much, He wanted us to be perfect and divine like Him and instead of preferring to take it easy, He took the pains of creating this world through His Holy Spirit (*Spenta Mainyu*) and bestowed absolute Free Will on us from the very beginning of creation [Ys 32.11]:

...so that a person can make his choice according to his/her own desire.

Even when in later Sasanian times the cosmic dualism tended to cede the ethical dualism of the Gathas, the doctrine of Free Will was never compromised and mankind was encouraged to be good by making the right choice. Therefore, our religion was called the Good Religion (*Veh Din*).

It could also be called the Religion of Right Choice. The Gathic word for Religion is *Daena*, meaning conscience and good conscience could only be developed by making right choice. Today, more than ever before in the history of mankind, making the right choice in life has become so very important in view of the multitude of temptations facing us that did not even exist just a generation or two ago. And no religious literature in the world, to my knowledge so consistently and vehemently preaches the importance of making the right choice in life as the Gathas, without ever compromising the principle of Free Will.

The Gathas therefore are even more relevant to our times than ever before. The importance of making the right choice is also the cornerstone of modern-day psychology which is having an ever-increasing influence on our psyche.

ROLE OF MAN IN THE GATHIC THEOLOGY

But the relevance of Gathas to our times increases even more, if one tries to contemplate about the need for a spiritual philosophy that will address the

needs of our technological age, of unprecedented material progress, scientific innovations, medical breakthroughs, etc, which has the potential in the right hands and minds to usher us into Frashokereti [Ys 30.9]:

Therefore, let us be those who will bring about Frashokereti.

But until we emulate God and godliness in every way, we cannot bring forth Frashokereti, which literally means making everything fresh – as fresh as when God first made this earth of his own image in the spiritual world. This world is therefore as sacred as the other world, and once we are here, we have to devote all our attention and energy to help anyone and to improve anything we can in our own humble way, as our spiritual fulfillment and mission on this earth. Even raising (good) children to further the work of God is a must, and the Gathas therefore rightly conclude with nuptial advise. *This makes man very important in the Gathic theology.*

Throughout the ages man has sought out religion to find out about the other world. Even though what the Gathas say about afterlife has been the basis of Judeo-Christian beliefs such as heaven and hell, purgatory, damnation, apocalypse and resurrection, the Gathas weave theology in such a harmonious way that God, Godliness, man's spirituality, this world, after-life and even the end of the world, all become part of a unified theory. The afterlife thus rests on what we do in this life.

This understanding is often lost on scholars who, for various reasons, tend to deny the influence of Zarathushti doctrines on the Judeo-Christian traditions. They may, for instance, admit certain eschatological (afterlife) influences but deny the influence of monotheistic ideas on the post-exilic Jewish beliefs, even though Zarathushtra treats them all as parts of one unified theology in which everything stands in relation to all other things.

Thus, nothing is possible without a loving, beneficent God who has granted Free Will to man to choose to be Godly and Godlike without His coercion and bring about Frashokereti as the end of time by right choice in every endeavor, etc. Unfortunately, even the distinguished scholars often miss this point.

A UNIFIED IDEOLOGY

The Gathic eschatology is not conceivable without the other - Gathic teachings about Mazda's Free Will, etc. As Mazda tends to everything in the universe, man too has to emulate Him by taking care of everything in the cosmos and therefore, the Gathas include the whole universe, even the sun, moon, stars and the planets [Yasna 44: 3 & 5], in its unified system of thinking – all for the love of man, thus emphasizing the importance of ecology and environment. What the later Avesta says about all the seven Amesha Spentas

working entirely in unison as one entity is also true of the entire Gathic theology – it works as one coherent, uniquely inter-related, unified ideology, leaving nothing out for the benefit of man.

I have stated elsewhere it was not the Greeks, but the Gathas, that have laid the basis of modernity by emphasizing the dignity of man, free will, and essential unity of everything in the cosmos. And what I have read lends further support to it albeit indirectly. Rev. R. H. Charles observes in *The Revelation of St. John* [Vol. 1, page clxxxvi]:

Apocalyptic and not Greek philosophy was the first to grasp the great idea that all history, albeit human, cosmological and spiritual, is a unity - a unity following naturally as a corollary of the unity of God. And yet, serious New Testament scholars of the present day have stated that apocalyptic has only to deal with the last things.

Even though he refers to the apocalyptic literature of much later times, what he says is even more true of the Gathas as the Greeks came into contact with the Persians long before they came to know much about the Jewish apocalyptic literature.

And at the center of this beautiful unity depicted in the Gathic philosophy is Man/Woman.

To me, the Gathas are a living proof of the love God bears for us and our welfare - here and hereafter. It is a God that so loves us that He won't ever act arbitrarily or dictatorially. In His infinite justice and fair-play He governs Himself by the same rules he govern us with: good for good, bad for bad. We never have to worry he will mete out any punishment (*anghahat*) to us if we did not do anything wrong to deserve it. It is a far cry from the arbitrary God we find, for example, in the Book of Job. How can He be arbitrary or punitive if He is a friend (*frija*) to us; likewise, a really religious person is a companion, brother or father to Ahura Mazda [Yasna 45.11]. No other proof of his love and concern for us is needed. Even the later Pahlavi scriptures bear clear testimony to God's love for us.

A LOVING GOD

It is in the fitness of things therefore, that the Gathas (apart from the Wedding Chapter) end with the praise and love for virtuous men and women [Yasna 51.22], this prayer later becoming the third most important Zarathushti prayer. Man, thus is the main concern of the Gathas and he indeed represents God in the world in the later literature.

Man could look nowhere else but to this world to attain his salvation and

the Gathas lovingly show him how to. God created this world through His Holy Spirit in His own image so we can enjoy it and learn to make it as good and fresh as He does by making right choices, thereby living in eternal joy and comfort with Him sans misery, sans death, sans diseases, sans everything bad. How can such a loving Mazda condemn us to the original sin on birth or regard the wholesome pleasures of the world as sinful or *maya* (illusion)!

If there is any unhappiness or punishment in this world, it is brought on by us by our own wrong choices - the Gathas, however, are silent about natural calamities which later on were thought to have been brought on by *Ahriman* (Evil Spirit).

The best blessing conferred on us by Mazda, however, is not the absence of Original Sin and the like, but the fusion of the material and the spiritual; so that whatever kind and clime and time of the world we find ourselves born in, we have to accept it as unfolding of God's love for us for our spiritual upliftment by following his Gathic guidance. We do not have to wander in search of Gurus in the East to find the truth as it is right within us, exactly where we find ourselves in life. And we cannot bring about our individual salvation without working for and assuring our collective *Nirvana* – anything else would be selfish; Ushtavaiti Gatha [Ys43.1] opens with:

Happiness to those who bring happiness to others

The merging of the spiritual and the material into one identity is so very evident in all our ceremonies and perhaps utmost in the investment of *Sudreh-Kushti* which makes our bodies and minds perpetually allies of God – even His Holy Spirit is clothed with sky [Yasna 30.5]. Of course, if we have to be Godlike, we have to be active like God [Yasna 34.1, etc.]. So be prepared for a life of Godly action – *Shyaothna, Karma*.

If the foregoing informal observations are not enough to convince us of God's love for us, (and they really are not), the most noteworthy evidence for it is in the most bewildering, but inescapable fact, most often overlooked, that by granting us Free Will, God has shown He loves us enough to part with His own Sovereignty to confer upon us an opportunity to learn to exercise our choices wisely and depend on us for the fate of the world until we unite with Him. This is benevolent mentality (Spenta Mainyu) par excellence.

Later on, this divine quality and magnificence of Mazda was misinterpreted in medieval times as the omnipotence of Mazda being temporarily limited by Ahriman, but the real Ahriman (Evil Spirit) is our own evil mentality retarding the work of God, and He loves us too much to see us continue being evil. His omnipotence is in no way limited. Like a loving father, He wants his children to be as good as He is, and is willing to wait till we learn to do so, for his omnipotence over Nature and all other creatures in this world, as well as the

entire universe beyond, remain uncompromised in the Gathas.

As Christianity too to some extent, unlike Judaism, shares the Gathic concept of Free Will and monotheism, Christian scholars often represent the same view. Thus, to quote Rev. Dr. Charles again, “His omnipotence is ethically and not metaphysically conceived. It is not unconditioned force. That He possesses such absolute power is an axiom of the Christian faith, but He will not use it, since such use of it would compel the recognition of His sovereignty, not win it; would enslave man, not make him free. Hence, the recognition of his sovereignty advances *pari passu* with the advance of Christ’s Kingdom on earth.” [Op. Cit, p. cx]. Substitute it with Zarathushtra’s Vohu Khshathra, “God’s good Dominion (Kingdom) which must be actively chosen by us.” [Yasna 51.1], and each fresh advance is followed by thanksgiving in heaven [op.cit; p. cx]. Compare it also with Ys 51.1:

Choosing God’s Dominion assures his future (in heaven) as good, as an adorable person (because) he attains heaven (which is Behest – the best) through his righteous actions. This very idea shall I (Zarathushtra) now bring to fulfillment for us.

Compare it also with Ys 51.18 and 51.21. But Ys 51.21 leaves no doubt that: “Ahura Mazda Himself has I established this (and) I shall implore Him for this good fortune” thus leaving us in no doubt about His omnipotence and His willingness to compromise it for the love of us humans.

* * *

Ervad Dr. Kersey H. Antia is high priest of the Zarathushti community in the Chicago area since 1977. A fully-ordained priest from the M.F. Cama Athornan Institute in Mumbai, since 1950, Dr. Antia studied religion and Avesta-Pahlavi under Dastoorji Dabu and other learned priests. Dr. Antia has lectured widely and is the author of numerous papers and articles on religion. Dr. Antia is a licensed clinical and management psychologist in full-time private practice in Illinois.