

Asha Vahishta Initiative (AVI) Conferences: Synopses

AVI Conference: May 5, 2018

As previously mentioned, the AVI Conferences project was devised as part of the extended activities of the Asha Vahishta Initiative (AVI).

In an effort to engage the widest possible range of expertise and opinions in connection with AVI efforts to interrogate faith and fellowship, the preliminary conference was able to attract 7 guest speakers, over 7 sessions between 8am to 6pm.

The main theme of the conference was how re-imagining faith might enable a re-claiming of the revolutionary ethos at the heart of Daena Mazdayasni. Many of the guest speakers commented upon their own social justice associations within and with specific faith communities. It was notable, how vibrant fellowship became when faith leaders inspired their congregations to reflect upon how religious practise must be paired with social justice 'good thoughts, good words, and good deeds'.

All speakers attested that religious traditions were by-and-large, radical in their original intent which was a clear repudiation of the social and political status-quo or their respective eras. In this way, faith and fellowship are rooted in anti-establishment critical discourse.

This was the most valuable take-away from the conference, as the AVI project continues to ponder whether, what sort, and by what means, change is to be accomplished. One thing is however clear; that stagnancy is not equal to tradition.

AVI Conference: May 26, 2018

The AVI (Asha Vahishta Initiative) Conferences continued on May 26, with the participation of 8 guest speakers, within an 8 session day from 8am to 8pm.

The main theme of the conference day was how conceptual re-imagining of faith might help faith-bodies and faith-leaders to re-claim fellowship.

All speakers spoke towards an operational perspective concerning how faith institutions and their executives, can revitalize fellowship by engaging in a re-imagining of the day-to-day operations that occur which connect people to their faith.

Using case studies of micro-communities having engaged in a re-discovery of their identity, through a reflection on their belonging, the conference reaffirmed that dynamic and vibrant faith communities are those which regularly investigate their beliefs.

It became clear to the assembled, by the end of the conference day, that xenophobia and apathy, are two sides of a single coin...the coin representing an irrelevant and vacant faith and fellowship within 21st century urban diaspora.

AVI Conferences: June 7 and June 9, 2018

The AVI (Asha Vahishta Initiative) Conferences continued on June 7 and June 9, with the participation of 5 guest speakers, and an additional 11 community members serving on panels, within 9 sessions over a two day period.

The main theme of the conference day was how a re-discovery of faith and fellowship could be fostered through a re-orientation by faith communities and faith leaders.

The guest speakers noted that self-perception of one's relationship to Creation is a key determinant of social conduct. Moreover, that a re-discovery of our connection within Nature, as part of the Environment, and in harmony with Others, might lead to stronger faith and fellowship.

Zoroastrian panelists, both local and non-local, also affirmed their belief that re-orientation by faith leaders towards key areas of faith administration, was necessary for creating a stronger fellowship. Lingering issues of concern to youth, women, diaspora populations, were noted to have been known and discussed over 40 years without resolution. In such circumstances, how can it not be that faith and fellowship is lost?

A striking observation by both, guest speakers, and Zoroastrian panelists, was that no transformative education effort can work, without leadership support. Marginalized and alienated populations within and of youth, women, and diaspora, only increase when it appears to them that faith leadership neither see nor hear them. Actions speak louder!

AVI Conferences: August 18 and August 19, 2018

The AVI (Asha Vahishta Initiative) Conferences continued, with great success, on Aug 18 and Aug 19. Both days ran from 8am to 8pm, with 8 sessions per day. This means a total of 16 guest speakers over two days!

The main themes were: institutional re-imagining of faith to re-claim fellowship; and what is to be done regarding practical and applied action.

Guest speakers were drawn from a wide variety of experiences.

The conversation revolved around how and why the development of narratives of communication are extremely important. It is through a careful examination of the stories we chose to tell, that community identity and belonging are sustained.

A diasporic population situated in an urban 21st century multicultural setting, must consciously choose its narratives in order to ensure that faith and fellowship remain relevant. What was also noteworthy, was that all sessions emphasized the role of an active and courageous leadership which is required for faith institutions and fellowship bodies.

Without inspired leadership, the possibilities for transformative education are reduced. Inaction was cited as the main culprit for the breakdown of fellowship and the loss of faith in contemporary circumstances, especially given the contrast with effective and rational systems of secular life which operate in parallel within all peoples' lives.

Hence, hearing excuses regarding inaction in the sphere of faith and fellowship, can only lead to an increasingly level of drop-outs from faith! Like the previous conference days (May 5, May 26, June 7, June 9), the AVI Conferences of Aug 18 and Aug 19, built upon the idea that re-imagining of faith is required in order to re-claim and sustain fellowship in diaspora.

AVI Conferences: September 22, 2018

The AVI (Asha Vahishta Initiative) Conferences continued, on September 22, with the first of a 3-Part programme (Part II on Oct 14, Part III on Nov 10). The main theme of the programme (all three parts): Making Spiritual Re-Imagining Actionable: Transformative Education Requires Transformed Leadership!

This 1st Part of the programme contained only one main speaker for the day. He spoke in conversation with the Chair, regarding the perspective of why humanism arose along with and as part of secular society. The main opinion offered, reflected the session title, that: Humanism and Critical Thinking: Rescued the World

from the Tyranny and Dogma of Religion. And, that in fact the rise of atheism had more to do with the failure of institutionalized religion to provide adherents with a sense, rationale, and an emotional-atmosphere for salvation and enlightenment.

Immediately following the guest speaker, the second and last session of the day involved a conversation between the Chair, and two community members. Together they reflected upon what the guest speaker had suggested, and whether there were merits of this argument. Further and by extension, whether those arguments and logic could be utilized to explain the current malaise within diasporic Zoroastrian faith and fellowship.

This session produced firm and honest opinions regarding the causes and consequences of a diasporic inability to articulate 'vision statement' and 'operating system' for contemporary Zoroastrianism. Additionally, the lack of a clear resolution mechanism and governance/authority structure were cited, as contributing to faith anarchy (multiple beliefs, multiple contesting narratives, etc).

Similar to the conclusions of the previous AVI Conferences (Aug 18 and Aug 19), the session and audience participants affirmed that without inspired leadership, the possibilities for transformative education are reduced. Inaction was cited as the main culprit for the breakdown of fellowship and the loss of faith in contemporary circumstances, especially given the contrast with effective and rational systems of secular life which operate in parallel within all peoples' lives.

Following this session (#2 of the of conference day), and as an extension of the same topic which was brought forward during the second session of that conference day—the Chair was again asked about plans to continue the AVI. The Chair's response reiterated that concretization and actionability were the criteria requirements for any projected 'Phase III of the AVI'.

Towards that end, agreement was made to establish an AVI Working Committee.

Notice by OZCF to its membership, in regard to the establishment of the AVI Working Committee, follows:

AVI Conferences: October 14, 2018

The AVI (Asha Vahishta Initiative) Conferences continued, on October 14, with the second of a 3-Part programme (Part I on Sept 22 and Part III on Nov 10). The main theme of the programme (all three parts): Making Spiritual Re-Imagining Actionable: Transformative Education Requires Transformed Leadership!

This 2nd Part of the programme contained four speakers.

We were honoured to be able to speak to our first conversant, Arianna Vafadari, an internationally renowned mezzosoprano of Iranian-French heritage. She enlightened us regarding her creative process and composition which lead to the development of the Gathas in song (which she performs globally). Many of her themes relating music to a universal, compassionate, and multifaceted language, were transferable lessons for the AVI in its attempt to re-imagine and re-claim.

This was followed by an equally stimulating conversation with Dr. Richard Foltz. He spoke to us about how the Iranians, throughout their history, have been a composite of ideas, cultures, and expressions. Hence, the aspects of identity and belonging are multi-centred and continuously re-imagined and re-claimed. Foltz also asserted that ZoroastrianISM (in the sense of a re-packaging and presentation of an indigenous faith, Daena Mazdayasni), was a 19th century framework resulting largely from Parsi interactions with British Protestants.

Next, the AVI conversed with Rabbi Michal Shekel, who was very kind in sharing some very comparable (to diasporic Zoroastrianism) Jewish faith/fellowship developments, with us. She was able to reflect upon the importance of how faith/fellowship is maintained in 21st century urban multicultural diasporic settings, and more importantly, how faith/fellowship lives as relevant expressions of daily life. She also provided us with many opportunities to examine our own plights, from the perspective of someone looking at another similar case (the Jewish diasporic identity).

Finally, we began a conversation regarding spirit injury, leading to immigrant alienation, with Dr. Louchakova-Schwartz. We are pleased that this conversation will continue, on Nov 10.

The take-away from this AVI Conferences day was that transformative education requires an equally motivated and transformed leadership, to initiate change within faith communities. Faith is a lived expression, not a ball-and-chain of history dragged along an increasingly farther and farther distance to the present. Fellowship is an atmosphere of belief, an emotional bonding of individuals who creatively re-imagine what it means to have faith and express faith within their secular circumstances.