

Asha Vahishta Seminar II #6: Synopsis

The sixth colloquium of AVSS Phase II, was a reprise of a Conversation in Faith session. In this case, Dr. Panthaki was joined by Ervad Panthaki, Ervad Dr. Bagli and Ervad Kotwal, to discuss the focus question:

Can current status-quo clerical and executive bodies, align themselves to the Asha Vahishta Initiative (AVI)? If so, can status quo bodies aid in the realization of the AVI? Might it be possible for them to aid the change, or are they doomed to suffer it?

Er. Panthaki, Er. Dr. Bagli, and Er. Kotwal, reflected upon the original purpose, and their various leadership roles within anjuman organization (associations in Ontario and Quebec), clerical bodies (NAMC), and umbrella organizations (FEZANA).

Dr. Panthaki referred to a public exchange (website) from 1998 (whose discussions had begun at least a decade earlier) between certain members of clergy from the United States, attempting to shame and slander Canadian members of NAMC who had put forward re-appraisals and re-imaginings of Zoroastrianism in the context of diaspora. Questions concerning who is Zoroastrian, what is Zoroastrianism, and what is the purpose of Zoroastrianism, and who should be priests. Indeed, the very issues begin reappraised and interrogated by the AVI: questions of identity, location, faith, fellowship, vision, goals.

Dr. Panthaki noted that:

“I realize with sincere humility and gratitude that if I am bold in vision, that if I have the audacity of hope for change, that if I am vested to dynamic perceptions, that if I display radical disregard for conventions, and irreverence for arguments based solely on scripture/tradition/custom/and the edicts of high-priests without an accompanying emotional wisdom and relevance attached.....that, these “faults” in me, are their justice! They were the Lightning, before my Thunder! Because the people causing the outrage, at the heart of the instigation for using Vohu Mana, and daring to reflect the faith and fellowship concerns of their anjuman, ...those blasphemers and heretics who began polite-conversation and academic-discussions in the late 1980s..., only for it to come to a break between so-called Orthodox and Liberals in 1998.... among them listed by name and association were Ervad Nozer Kotwal, Ervad Gustad Panthaki and Ervad Dr. Jehan Bagli.”

The discussion built on a consensus that, both in the 1980-1990s and currently the AVI (2016--), were a necessary challenge and check to institutionalized hypocrisy, stagnation of the soul (personal and clerical spiritual development), and corruption of dogma. Such actions whether in

1998 or 2018, inspire us to believe rather than to follow blindly. To be active in spirituality rather than passive in religion.

Dr. Panthaki wondered out loud, how capable status-quo bodies were (whether they were equipped structurally and via directive) to ally with the AVI. Responding to a comment that he might not appreciate the 'progress' made since the 1970s, Dr. Panthaki responded:

"They (Er. Panthaki-Kotwal-Bagli) are correct...that I cannot fathom their struggle against ignorance and ir-religiosity.... But to say that this is "progress" would be delusional. Worse than that....doing so, gives status-quo bodies, and status-quo attitudes, praise and respite that they do not deserve. As I said last session, and I repeat here and now, I acknowledge the bravery and courage of those who fought to promote the change, but I will not praise organizations for "giving in". If anything, I am cynical about the reasons for their compromise....it does not stem from a shift in attitudes, or an acquisition of wisdom, but from a motive to preserve stature and power, both institutional and personal."

Discussion continued around the convergence of aims from the 1980s-1990s (involving Er-Panthaki-Bagli-Kotwal) and the AVI. It was concluded that the cause was similar: Diasporic Daena, Autocephalous Organization, Articulation of Vision. Dr. Panthaki then pointed out that the source of disagreement between himself and his interlocutors, arose from their attachment to current status-quo institutions, specifically their belief that the same institutions could act as change-agents and transformative bodies promoting spiritual growth:

"So then where lies our issue?not to the vision, which we hold in common....but to the institutional structure which I identify as systemically counter-intuitive and counter-productive to their years of work for faith and fellowship in diaspora. I believe that the organizational and operational structures that are dear to them; that they spent effort building, have become the shackles that have resisted the inspirational changes that these men aspired for. And..... I am enraged on their behalf! Because I see the rationale from their perspective, for fostering these organizations, from the perspective of their location in specific time and space. I knew what they thought, that executive bodies would provide continuing breath to their aspirations. It is reflective of the top-down management theories of their era, those of 1960s-1980s. But in the absence of like-minded leadership, specifically in their absence from or with power.....those structures they helped to create become utilized for regression....not for a mandate of diasporic Daena, but for the outsourcing of religion. A quick glance at NAMC minutes over the last decade, will indicate that such institutions are the source of struggle rather than resolution. The institutions have a chance to become beacons when names such as Kotwal, Bagli, ...among others....were once again listed as "President", or "Secretary" or similarly....but once such people are no longer leading, those

very institutions become the source of something quite different. All the while, the Anjuman is held captive.....”

Dr. Panthaki stated that this is the reason why the Asha Vahishta Initiative remains un-inclined to attach itself to any status-quo body. It is because the AVI methodology attempts to re-inspire the vision of people like Ervad Kotwal, Ervad Dr. Bagli, and Ervad Panthaki:

“.....not through their replacement with a single person, or even a team of people.....and not even through yet another education project that will...hopefully...groom leadership.....but by mobilizing the Anjuman...so that there is not just one enlightened voice to depend on or to replace, but an inspired choir who simultaneously re-discovers their faith and fellowship, while also coming to the self-realization that authority rests in the Anjuman. The AVI possesses an awareness that institutional bodies become archaic, stagnant, or worse still---regressive---if not guided by an ethos, a mission statement, an operating system, that disallows regression.”

The basis of the AVI exercise is action-research, a re-imagining of faith and fellowship, based on an articulation of mission-statement and operating-system for Daena Mazdayasni in diaspora. The conclusion of which is that the status-quo bodies continued existence, will be directly proportional to Anjuman relevance for them, their clergy, and their supposed authority and resolution making mechanisms. The conversation hereby changes, and all notions of justification becomes rooted to the Anjuman vision and direction of itself.

The purpose of institutionalization was also questioned. Were institutions birthed in a void, detached from purpose? Was it not, that institutionalization would create a firm basis of support for a diasporic and decentralized vision of Daena? Acknowledging his personal feelings of affection for Er. Panthaki-Kotwal-Bagli, Dr. Panthaki stated that:

“loyalty is not blindly given to parents, traditions, origins, or even texts, but within the context of “A WISDOM OF INTERDEPENDENCE, AND A WORSHIP OF RECIPROCITY” (The AVI articulation of Humata-Hukta-Huvarshata). Daena Mazdayasni is not that of a finite, gifted religion, that one follows blindly.... it is a logarithmic enlightenment.... a continuous amassing of wisdom.... contributed to by every generation.....as a congregational covenant... extending throughout the ages. Therefore, not only, cannot, the faith be what it was, before.....it MUST NOT BE.....because that would be antithetical to the precepts of the faith itself.... Mummification is not equivalent to preservation. Your faith is not a museum showpiece that is so delicate that it rests beyond your examination and grasp, to be ogled in a glass case, for fear that if you ‘touch’ it, engage with it, that it might disintegrate! We are advised to constantly be better at living, at developing our sense for global social justice....at realizing just exactly what Asha is..... so, unless you have stopped

living, stopped learning, stopped communing...you must re-imagine, re-evaluate, and re-visit your pre-suppositions.”

The Conversation in Faith session ended with an acknowledgement that, if not the working model Articles of Faith, a similar document would represent a Covenant mission-statement and operating-system within which all adherents and participants of Daena Mazdayasni abide. A glance at the Articles provides proof that this includes Priests/Officiants/Executives, and that it is not just a code of conduct binding laity. The Articles IMPOSE responsibility through the acknowledgement that Daena Mazdayasni is a relationship covenant, a way of knowing and a way of being regarding the WISDOM OF INTERDEPENDENCE AND THE WORSHIP OF RECIPROCITY. The Articles are therefore meant to be adhered to, rather than administrated-over. This makes institutionalization and institutions less powerful, if not redundant.

The Articles form the ‘justification of faith’ that provides the Anjuman project of the Asha Vahishta Initiative (AVI) with its legitimacy. This is the only way an intimate, lived, and dynamic faith and fellowship can be sustainable. Authority resides in the Anjuman! It extends outward. Faith must be the decentralized expression of locally administered and organic leadership! Anjuman Priests, Anjuman Executive, although they may belong to external body memberships, must consider their primary responsibility as service to the Anjuman (i.e. a non-compete). In this way, there may be fewer cases of disharmony between clergy and congregation. Indeed, most issues plaguing contemporary Zoroastrianism might be immediately solved by adherence (consultation) to the Articles. Moreover, clergy and exec., because they are nominated or vetted by the Anjuman, remain committed to administering and adhering the Anjuman vision of its faith and fellowship (as per the Articles).