

Asha Vahishta Seminar #6: Synopsis

The sixth session of the Asha Vahishta Seminar series dealt with the theme of Blasphemy, Heresy, Heterodoxy and its context to and within Zoroastrianism.

Participants began by defining and understanding these concepts in relation to religion. How and why these concepts hold meaning was discussed, in relation to when and for what purpose they are used during a religious discussion. It was observed that within contemporary discussions regarding Zoroastrian controversies (controversial topics), that the words Blasphemy, Heresy, and Heterodoxy are used inappropriately.

Similarly, participants were made aware that the use of 'Conservative', 'Liberal', 'Orthodox', 'Traditionalist', 'Reformer', 'Moderate', and 'Purist', are equally meaningless. This is because such aforementioned categories represent fixed identities that reflect immutable positions. Besides creating polarization within community and for discussion, it is untrue that anyone maintains such a fixed identity over all intellectual and social spheres. Or more to the point, that opinions do not evolve, and remain fixed regardless of changes due to intellectual, spiritual, or chronological maturation.

The discussants observed that such categories betray an understanding of individuals, their points of view, and the real issues which are being debated. To illustrate this fact, participants seated in groups (specific tables) were made to determine the majority group consensus on a topic (e.g. Conversion, Female Priesthood). Next, they were asked to take 10 minutes, in order to prepare THE OPPOSITE perspective. Each group then shared this. It became clear that it was relatively difficult for people to argue the other side---meaning, it was difficult for people to see the other side's point of view--meaning, that it betrayed a lack of holistic understanding of the issue itself. Instead of concrete and well-argued statements, most participants offered empty proclamations---illustrating that they either held disdain for the alternate viewpoint, or that they were essentially unaware of the alternate perspective.

Participants were made aware that religions evolve in the following process. From idea, to local expression, to regional adoption, to becoming culture, then political or imperial backed as official, associating with the nation, and lastly with a global expression.

At the same time, there are various models or interpretations of religion over the course of this development. Religion may be prescriptive, ritualistic, liturgical, referential, administrative, or personal.

The session concluded with most understanding the complexities of debating contentious issues, and quite possibly, with a better understanding of their 'opponents'.