ORGAN DONATION:
MESSAGE OF THE GATHAS AND OTHER RELIGIONS

by Dr. Homi Dhall

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A few days back, on December 12, 2014, The Times of India reported on its cover page a heartrending story of a 15 month old baby who was the son of a UP farmer. Tragically, he had a hole in his heart. Added to this serious problem was the fact that his blood type was extremely rare called the Bombay Blood Group. It was reported that only 190 Indians have this particular group. Three donors from different parts of India came forward to donate their blood which enabled the baby to undergo surgery. This noble act on the part of the donors saved the life of this child and brought great joy to the parents.

Another inspiring incident took place on November 22, 2012 when a brilliant young student Sushant Kaushal died in a car crash in New Delhi. The family’s large heartedness allowed several organs to be harvested viz., intestinal transplant, kidney, liver, heart, corneas and small intestines thereby benefiting seven others. Sushant’s father rightfully said “My son lives in seven lives”.

Who could possibly say that donating blood or harvesting organs to save lives was unethical or irreligious and would displease God?

Before I analyze this crucial matter of organ donation from an interreligious point of view, I shall briefly express my opinion about the Zoroastrian perspective. It is an established fact that Zarathushtra lived in the hoary past. At that point of time, there was no such thing as organ donation and naturally we do not find any reference to it in the Gathas. According to Zoroastrianism, we live in an imperfect world where there is so much suffering. Prophet Zarathushtra has taught us that as we are hamkars (helpers) of Ahura Mazda, it is our duty to work ceaselessly in spreading joy and happiness by overcoming all forms of evil. In the very first sentence of the Ushtavaiti Gathas, the Prophet exhorts that “happiness comes to him who brings happiness to others”. What other way does one bring happiness to others, other than through service. There are also other references in the Gathas emphasizing service to humanity. A few of these references may be quoted here. “Grant us the gift of long enduring life, long life of service…” (Yasna 43.13): “Should preach the law of Mazda to mankind, better by acts of service then by words” (Yasna 51.19). Hence, we can safely derive from this important concept of service that organ donation to the suffering is certainly one of the noblest acts of service.

I shall now very briefly refer to the opinions of scholars and religious leaders from other traditions. When this important matter of organ donation is being discussed in the community, it is imperative to know what our sister communities are actually practicing.
Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, one of the leading authorities on Hinduism states that: “Do not worry about the soul. You'll certainly not be born blind in your next life if you pledge your eyes after death this time”. He further states that organ donation is a “sacred offering, a noble gesture”. He emphasizes by stating that “People are often misled by 'beliefs' (read superstitions) that have no space in any religion…As far as belief systems go, if religion contradicts science, go with science…If your religion says, you'll go to hell if you donate your organs, I'd say: Stick to science. Not only has the recipient of the organ benefited, but also his family and community. When a blind person gets to see, he becomes independent, confident and is able to help himself and others”.

In Islam, organ donation is believed to be sadqa jariyah, that is, continuous charity. For example, if a blind person receives another's eyes after the person's death and can see, that is sadqa jariyah, because even after death the benefits from his donation continue to be received by another. Organ donation signifies living with the spirit of compassion, say Islamic scholars. The donor loses nothing, but gives others something precious — the gift of life. Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, a prominent Islamic scholar states that “Organ donation is continuous charity…that one is desirous of extending one’s spirit of service to others even after one’s death”.

The Catholic Church teaches that organ transplants are in conformity with moral law...Pledging one's organs to be donated after death is a noble and meritorious act and is to be encouraged. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI said: "Organ donation is a special form of witness to love.... In a period like ours, often marked by various forms of selfishness, it is ever more urgent to understand how the logic of free giving is vital to a correct conception of life.... As Jesus taught us, only whoever gives one's own life can save it (Luke 9:24)".

On August 29, 2000, St. Pope John Paul II delivered an address to the XVIII International Congress of the Transplantation Society: “Every organ transplant has its source in a decision of great ethical value: the decision to offer without reward a part of one’s own body for the health and well-being of another person...Here precisely lies the nobility of the gesture, a genuine act of love…”.

Rabbis and scholars across the spectrum of Jewish life have upgraded their views on this. Organ donation from a dead body is seen as an act of saving life, pikkuah nefesh...One of the most compelling arguments for organ donation is the love, mercy and compassion involved in such an act. Saving a life is a fundamental imperative in Judaism...“Charity to donate organs is greater than all sacrifices. Tzedakah or charity is an attribute of God himself” says Rabbi Malekar.

Dr. Ms. Meenal Katarnikar, a well-known Jain scholar states “In ancient Jaina texts, there is no clear or hidden reference for organ transplant or organ donation...In contemporary society, Jaina community is not away from getting the benefits of organ transplant. They go for kidney transplants, blood transfusions etc. and even Jaina doctors are not hesitant about it"
Since organ donation is a relatively recent phenomenon, it would not be referred to in the ancient scriptures of various religions. And yet we find that a large number of religious leaders support it globally. They interpret their scriptures to be in step with the changing times and thus make their religious beliefs relevant even today. This is a lesson Zoroastrians ought to learn from other religions viz., to make our religion and beliefs relevant today in a fast-changing world.