

# GATHIC THOUGHT EAST OF PERSIA - A QUEST LONG OVERDUE

*By Dr. Kersey H. Antia*

There is little doubt in the scholarly circle today that Zarathushtra's Gathic teachings about the importance of man as an ally of God in routing out all evil from the world and bringing about *Frashokereti*, the complete renovation of the world, by choosing to be good and practicing good thoughts, words and deeds, have contributed greatly to the Judeo-Christian beliefs in life after death, heaven and hell, importance of ethical conduct, coming of the Messiah, ultimate victory of the forces of good over the forces of evil, resurrection, etc.

Little attention, however, has been given by scholars to the similarities between the Gathic and Eastern philosophies, possibly because of the fundamental differences between these two ideologies.

The fact that the two religious systems are so different should not obscure some resemblances between them. While it is true that Zarathushtra broke up with the Aryan tradition when he expounded the idea of *Frashokereti* and complete removal of all evil from the face of this earth as the ultimate cosmic goal, he was first and foremost an Aryan thinker in the tradition of a Rigvedic Rishi. The only reason we are able to translate his Gathic teachings today is because he spoke a language that is so similar to the one spoken by Rigvedic Rishis and he even sang his Gathas in the same meters, as are found in the Rigveda. Along with a common linguistic heritage came so much history and so many religious concepts shared by the two people in common over so many generations. Such concepts and ideas die hard, for example, the belief in the cosmic law of *Ruta* or *Asha* governing the universe, the beneficent cow representing a revelation or universe, the *Asuras* and *Daevas* forever fighting for men's allegiance, man trying to appease God or gods through *Yasna* or *Yagna*, importance of fire and sacred thread, beliefs about life after death, and many more.

## **Comparison of the Beliefs of Vedic Aris with Gathic Precepts:**

Despite some references in the Zoroastrian literature to the Indian, such as *Changranchacha* conferring with Zarathushtra, a direct influence of Gathic teachings on the Indian thoughts is hardly conceivable. Rather, such influences may be indirect and gradual, inspiring the Indo-Aryans at times to hold on to the concept of *Varuna* as Supreme Being, and culminating perhaps in direct

exchanges between the two fraternal people during the Achaemenid or Kushan hegemony over India. So far, it is difficult, if not impossible, to trace the influence of Gathic thought on the Indian mind. However, a possible explanation could perhaps be deduced from the research of Enric Aguilar I Matas, that is, of course, if his views are correct. -*R̥gvedic Society*, Brill's Indological Library, Volume 2, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991. Disagreeing with such prominent scholar's in the field as Dumézil, Thieme, Kuiper, Benveniste, and Renou, Matas holds that Rigvedic Society was divided into two different elite groups, one lead by Aris and other by Suris, who were quite hostile to each other, and held onto different patron gods, different theological notions and different patterns. They were competing with each other fairly well during the early Rigvedic period, but ultimately the Suris prevailed over the Aris. The Aris were clan leaders, and the Suris were war leaders. The Aris were sedentary people, who preferred to make peace with the indigenous population of Dasyus by forming alliances with them, while the Suris were nomadic warriors, unrelentingly hostile to the Dasas and Dasyus, the native inhabitants of India. Interestingly, the Aris worshiped Varuna, and the other Asuras as their divinities, whereas the Suris worshiped Indra and the Daevas. They also had opposing notions about religiosity, divinity and creation. The Suri-faction believed in creation through self- sacrifice of the divinity, and therefore, tended to be very ritualistic. Neither the Aris, nor their God's were in any way associated with these rituals, and the Aris rather tended to be hostile to them. Among the Suris Prajapati represented the idea of the Supreme God, who sacrificed himself in order to create the world, while the Aris regarded Varuna as their Supreme God, who does not sacrifice himself in order to create the world, but engenders it the way a father engenders a son. If the Matas' thesis is valid, it is plausible to assume that the Aris may represent a group of Aryans that were originally closer to the Iranian shepherds than Indian nomads, but somehow chose to migrate to India for eking an existence in times of drought, religious schism, etc., though it must be noted that Matas does not make such an assumption at all. It is interesting to note that the differences between their lifestyles and religious views are the same as described in the Gathas between the Ahura-worshipping, and Daeva-worshipping Aryans.

What Matas observes about the opposition between the Devas and Asuras in the Rigveda reminds one so much of the Gathas – Yasna 30 and 45 in particular: “The association of the devas with the sacrifice was such that it made them into a class of deities entirely different from the asuras, to the point that being a worshipper of the devas was in practice incompatible with being a worshipper of the asuras and to choose one class of deities amounted to rejecting the other, for if one notion of divinity was considered the true one, the other could scarcely not be considered the false one. This explains why agni at the moment of passing to the side of Indra shows his rejection of the Father Asura calling him adeva. This explains also why the worshippers of the devas

end by entirely rejecting the cult of the asuras, changing them into a kind of demons. But this also explains why a part of the Aryan community of the Rigvedic period that was apparently attached to the cult of the Supreme Asura cannot help denigrating the cult of the devas. The opposition to the cult of a series of important devic figures, like Indra, Soma, Yama, or the Purusha extends to the entire group of the devas, as is shown by the frequent mention of people who are devoid of the deva-cult, or who revile it (*adeva devanid*), some of whom were certainly not non-Aryan, as can be seen by these words of 10.38.3:

When a non-worshipper of the devas, be he a Dasa or an Aryan,  
has the intention of fighting against us, O much praised Indra,  
then may the enemies be easily defeated by you with our help.

Matas believes that the reasons to oppose the deva-cult on the part of a section of the Indo-Aryan community, might have been more than one. The special relationship between the devas and the nomadic Aryans as revealed by the Satapatha Brahmana 6.8.1.1. (Ibid. 82) may have, according to Matas, led to the rejection of the devas by the sedentary Aris, who followed the cult of the asuras. The opposition to the cult of the devas by the Aris may have centered around the classification of these deities as *yajniya bhaga*, that is, as a divine group especially connected with the sacrifice and as such clearly differentiated from the group of the asuras, described in Rg. 10.124.3 as *ayajniya bhaga*, namely, as deities disconnected from the sacrifice. (Ibid. 139).

After examining all the mentions of the word *adeva* as referring to human groups in the Rigveda, Matas find that these human groups are either Dasic or ari-led groups, never suri-led groups, for the latter appear everywhere as fervent worshippers of the devas. What is more significant for our purpose is the fact that Rigveda does not limit itself to speaking of the Ari-led groups as Aryan opponents to the deva-cult, but it also quite often describes the Ari either directly or indirectly as an opponent of the cult, e.g., Hymn 6.25.

Matas dwells only with the different connection of the Rigvedic tradition with the Suris and Aris, and pays comparatively little attention to the theological basis of their antagonism (p. 146-149), which needs to be examined further. Relying solely on the views of R. C. Zaehner (*The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism*, 19, p. 83), Matas believed that the rejection of the Devas by the Aris in India corresponds with Zoroaster's rejection of the Daevas in Iran, and before him by his inherited religion, "the law against the Daevas", for which there is no unanimity among scholars, many insisting that it was only Zarathushtra's reform that led to the rejection of the Daevas among the Aryans – Yasna 30.6. If this is true, the Aris could have been influenced by this reform directly or indirectly, but may have ultimately gotten assimilated in the early Indian society very much like the Mithra worshipping Magis a few centuries

later, by transferring their allegiance from Ahura Mazda to Asura Varuna to Indra.

Matas himself points out that the rejection of the Daevas by Iranians and Aris bear a certain similarity, but he does not expand on it. However, one may tend to agree with Matas' observation that

the opposition of the two cults had as a political and economic background the opposition between a peaceful agricultural and pastoral population and the fierce nomadic tribes, to which Zoroaster refers everywhere as 'the followers of the Lie' and which he characterizes as worshippers of the *daevas*. The special connection of *daevas* and *ahuras* with the two main sectors of the Iranian population is shown in a clear light in certain passages of the Vendidad, where we see Ahura Mazda as the staunch defender of the sedentary population and the *daevas* as their born enemies and as such as representative of the nomads with their characteristic hatred for agriculture. (Op. cit. p. 146.)

As Matas' thesis is not found acceptable by the scholarly community at present, as is evident from its outright rejection by Stephanie W. Jamison in her review of Matas' book in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Volume 113, No. 2, April-June 1993, 311-314. However, Jamison's criticism "seems excessively harsh" on her own admission, and whoever blazes a new trail and challenges well-established notions is bound to invite such criticism. However, one may concur with Jamison when she opines that "Matas could have focused more on cosmologies and attitude towards ritual and divinities in the Rigveda". When such an effort is made, we might be able to know more about the Iranian elements in the Aris' religious heritage.

The Aris might have migrated to India because of some religious schism or they may have been driven out by the Iranians for not accepting Zoroaster's Reform in toto, which is quite possible in view of the arrogance ascribed to them in the Rigveda as their general characteristic, per Matas. However, the theological basis between this antagonism needs to be explored. Matas believes that the connection of the Daevas with Aeshma can perhaps provide a clue in this regard, but it remains a matter of conjecture so far.

### **Trend Towards Monism is the Later Rigveda**

The latter part of the Rigveda already reflect a trend from Polytheism to Pantheism, and various gods became little more than mere names, making a single reality whom "they call Indra, Mitra, Varuna, Agni, or again, it is the celestial bird Garutmat. What is but One the wise call (by) various (names)." - Rigveda I, 164.46. The Brahmins, which include exegetic material mixed in

with the sacred formulas, *inter alia*, speak about the origin of the universe and creation itself as a sacrificial act, which, however, the Aris did not seem to accept. Aranyakas, the concluding part of the Brahmanas make a deliberate effort with the innermost nature of man and his relation to the universe, which merge into the philosophical treatise called Upanishads, which constitute the Vedanta, “the end of the Vedas” and the quintessence of Hinduism. They represent the ‘pantheistic’ and ‘monistic’ tendencies, which is so characteristic of Hinduism to this day. As observed by R. C. Zaehner, “this tendency towards ‘monism’ is rather rare in the Rig-Veda itself, but not foreign to it.” (*Hinduism*, Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 39.) It is quite prominent in the tenth and last book, which may be of a later date, but it is also present in the so-called ‘riddle’ hymns of the earlier books.

There are at least three hymns in the tenth book of the Rigveda that echo the pantheistic monism of the Upanishads, namely, RV., 10.90, 121, and 129. In 10.121, we find the poet searching for a real God to whom worship can be offered, not just because the tradition prescribes it, but essentially because he is the creator of the Universe, and therefore, alone worthy of one’s adoration. RV. 10.121 explains how the creator God emerged: “The great waters gave birth to the sea as Fire and Golden Seed, the Prajapati, the Lord of Creatures, who is both death and immortality; but he is also creator and generator of heaven and earth, king and lord of all that lives and breathes, ruler of all things according to right and valid law.” While we may not see complete similarity between Ahura Mazda and Prajapati, the cosmic Law of Asha or Daityanam, Rathvyanam and Right Law, Apam Napat (‘the offspring of Waters’) fire, in view of Apam Napat’s association with the fire-angel Nairyosangha.

### **Idea of judgment After Death**

We see the concept of judgment after death in the Brahmanas for the first time : Men’s deeds are weighed in the balance, and the good are rewarded and the evil are punished, both being separated from each other in the presence of Yama, the counterpart of the Yima in Yasna 32. The lot of the righteous in heaven is given more emphasis than the distress of the wicked in hell, which is quite in consonance with the trend in the Gathas. The souls of the dead, called ‘fathers’, are ancestral spirits quite akin to the Favashis in the Avesta.

### **Gathic echoes in The Monism in the Upanishads**

In the Svetasvatara Upanishad we see the culmination of the efforts towards theism in the earlier Upanishads and Rigveda. Its God is no longer one God among many, but the First Cause who emanates, sustains and reabsorbs the universe into his own substance, and who looks more and more like the God of the Gathas. Maheshwara dwells in the human heart and “who so knows him

with heart and mind as dwelling in the heart, becomes immortal” (4.20) “He, the Protector, creates all things and welds them together at the end of time” (3.2) – notice the phrase ‘at the end of time’, which reminds one of “the end of existence” in the Gathas. Life has a purpose and that is the divinization of man, the transforming union of his soul into God, in which the soul is fused into the likeness of God – compare Zarathushtra “begging for Thy sight (Sanskrit, *Darshan*) and consultation, O Wise Mazda” in Yasna 33.6 and Yasna 60.12 and 71.31, which is also the last (Gathic-like) paragraph in Hoshbam, which is to be prayed every day at dawn, not once like most prayers, but thrice: “with best Asha (Ruta) and with most unsurpassing Asha (Ruta) I yearn to have your Darshan (I yearn to behold you), I want to (lovingly) circle around you and long to be one with you forever”, we find this idea in Soham (“I am He”) or Tatvam Asi (“I am That”). Compare this also with what we find in the Shaiva Siddhanta (3.8.29), which seems to represent the highest form of theism ever conceived by Indian rishis: “They will unite with God, they will never leave God and God will never leave them.” Further the soul melts into God (3.8.30) and experiences an ineffable union with God (3.11.9).

## **The Gita and the Gatha**

The Gathas emphasized the importance of action and affirmation of life. However, as Dasturji Dr. M. N. Dhalla observes so well, “among the Aryan settlers of India, renunciation of the world of desires became an ideal of Life. The Bhagavad Gita seeks to find compromise by advising the wise to desire without any attachment and to act without any expectation of reaping fruits. Life without action is unthinkable ..... thus, says Krishna, he acts himself, for the world would perish if he ceased to work .... Action, he says, is better than inaction, and he adds that immunity from action can be had by action alone ..... Man has to perform his duty Zealously in whatever station of life he may happen to be ..... or better still, says Krishna, he should do his deeds in the name of his God, and for him, and dedicate all his activity to the glory of God.” (*History of Zoroastrianism*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1938, 123-124).

There is another similarity between the Gathas (Yasna 29) and the Gita (4.8) where (in the manner of a Saoshyant) Krishna declares that “he would come to this earth from time to time, for the protection of the good, and the destruction of evil-doers,” and often quoted by his teachers (in conjunction with Yasna, 29, without any connotation, of course, of the latter implying any reincarnation), while this author was a student in a Zoroastrian seminary that he came to memorize it as well as any Avestan prayer.

## Post-Vedanta Period

It is interesting to note that the parallels between the Gathic and Hindu thought abound even in the post-Vedanta period. For example, Ramanuja taught that God's love is unconditional. The selfish cultivation of one's own immortal soul is contemptuously dismissed by him as fit only for those who do not know how to love (Ramanuja on Bhagvada Gita, 12.11-12). Madhava, who lived in the thirteenth century A.D., went very much further than Ramanuja in this regard. Differing from all previous theologians in India, he classified souls into three categories - 1) a few good souls worthy of attaining loving communion with Vishnu and Vayu (the Avestan and Vedic god of wind, transformed by Madhav - into the Holy Spirit), 2) Majority of souls that are of indifferent quality, and 3) deprave souls that will suffer eternal punishment in hell. Madhava's teachings are certainly not typical of Indian thought, and it is not surprising therefore, that even Zaehner, among others, regard it as a Christian influence (op. cit, 101). However, Christianity had hardly arrived in India in the thirteenth century. The influence of Christianity on Hinduism is generally thought to be a much later phenomenon. Stephen Neill (*A History of Christianity in India, The Beginning to A. D. 1707*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), and L. W. Brown (*The Indian Christians of St. Thomas*, Cambridge, 1982), have studied the history of early Christianity in India, but not found large presence of Christians except in Malabar, where too they were in constant danger of inanition by assimilation by masses of Hindus surrounding them. However, Vayu is the creation of Spenta Mainyu, which is the Holy Spirit in the Gathas – Yasna 22.24, 25.5, etc. Vayu is the only angel who is, like Ahura Mazda, known by many names – 47 in all, one such name being the Liberator. Vayu is also associated with death in Zoroastrianism. (*See my forthcoming publication for more information on this subject.*)

## Metaphors and Concepts Common in the Vedas and the Gathas

While there may not be anything metaphorical in the 'lament of the cow' in Mahabharata, it is important to note that this phrase is the same as used by Zarathushtra in Yasna 29.1 where the cow seems to embody religious vision. The Vedic word Dhi, having the same etymology as the Gathic word Daena, implies "vision" or "(spiritual) insight" man should develop and the Vedic expression Gao Dhenu (milk-giving cow) may represent vision furthering one's spiritual horizon and understanding. As pointed out by H-P Schmidt, Zarathushtra has used some elements of the Vala myth where the truth, vision, and song are imprisoned in the Vala cave and must be freed, which "is clear from his use of the Vedic terminology", such as "to seek the cow" (Yasna 50.2) and "to find the cow" (Yasna 51.5), as these expressions are quite

common in the Rigveda (*Zarathustra's Religion and His Pastoral Imagery*, Universitaire Pers, Leiden, 1975).

According to the Hadokht-Nask, a person's Daena is received on the third dawn after his death by a beautiful maiden or an ugly, depending on his good or evil deeds. The beautiful maiden bears many similarities with those of the Vedic Usas who is also depicted as a beautiful maiden, and the later Avestan deity Chista 'cognition, perception', the 'likeness' (upamana) of Daena, also reflects traits of the Indo-Iranian goddess Usas. "Several elements of the soul's journey to yonder world," observes Schmidt, "have their exact counterparts in the Veda, especially the concept of the bridge to be crossed and the reception of the departed soul by a maiden or maidens. A striking, hitherto unnoticed, parallel is furnished by the late Vedic Kausitaki- Upanisad (1.4) in the names of two of the heavenly nymphs, apsaras, who receive the soul: Manasi 'consisting in thought' and Caksusi 'Consisting in sight'. Their close semantic relationship to Daena 'vision' and Chista 'cognition' is noteworthy. Another nymph is called Pratrirupa 'likeness' and I would venture the guess that these three nymphs are a substitution for the heavenly counterpart of man's soul or part of his soul, derived from a distributive description. This speculative trait was blended with a probably much older idea according to which the departed warrior was to enjoy the company of heavenly maidens in afterlife. That the speculative trait shows such proximity to concepts of Zoroastrianism, is remarkable and should stimulate the search for further parallels to Zoroastrian ideas in the Upanisads." (Ibid, p. 22)

The vocabulary of Upanishad can often be useful in providing interpretation of certain Gathic words, such as I. J. S. Taraporewala interpreted horses in 44.1 8 as the human senses on the basis of Katha-Upanishad 1.3.3-6-*The Divine Songs of Zarathushtra*, Bombay, 1951, pp. 524 ff. Another example, as pointed out by H-P Schmidt is "the expression to utter the worst in order to see the cow and the sun", which is an extension of the Indo-Iranian metaphor "to see the sun" in the sense of "to live a full life (or long) life", which is also found in Yasna 9.29 in a slightly different guise – "to see the earth and the cow with the eyes." Again, as pointed out by H-P Schmidt, the term 'gav' in juxtaposition with 'sun' refers to the 'dawn' in Yasna 32 as dawn in the vedas is closely connected with the vision. For Zarathushtra, cow could stand for both dawn and vision as "seeing of the cow and the sun are associated with the visionary contact with yonder world where beside the sun also truth is hidden" per Schmidt, who finds F. B. J. Kuiper also agreeing with him in IJ8, 1964, pp. 110, 120 & 124. (Ibid, 15).

## Ushtana and Prana

The cosmic wind that blows in the universe gave the usual course of things or the cosmic order (rta) (Asha in the Gathas) in the same way that breath in

living beings motivates life. Thus, wind (vayu in Sanskrit, as well as Avesta) is the breath (prana) of the cosmic person (Purusa) (RV 10.90.1 3) and the dead person's spirit (atman) goes to the wind (*vata* in Sanskrit, as well as Avesta) (RV 10.16.3). In humans, speech results from mankind's wind. The Zoroastrian priests cover their mouth while praying in order to keep their breath away from the fire in Zoroastrian rituals and its origin may be well rooted in this ancient belief that speech results from mankind's wind. The association between prana, life's indicator and motivator, and atmospheric wind (*vata*) led to the establishment of the health- giving and healing virtues of wind. Wind bestows strength to live and contains the elixir of immortality (RV 10.186). The medicinal significance of wind occurs also in the Avesta (Jean Filliozat, *La Doctrine classique de la medecine indienne*, 1962 English, 1971). The importance of prana as life's promoter and sustainer is indicated by AV 11.4(6), an entire hymn devoted to life-breath.

It is only in this context that the importance of Zarathushtra dedicating his own Ushtana (which is comparable to the Vedic Prana), his own vital life-breath, in Yasna 33.14 can be precisely perceived and interpreted. It is the Vedas that bears out the full significance of Zarathushtra bestowing his own Ushtana (Prana) to the Wise One in Yasna 33.14, a concept which we also find in the beginning of all Nyaeshes, as well as Narejote prayers: "Unto You, Amesha Spentas, I give worship and adoration in thought, word, and deed, (even) my life, my body, my own self and breath (Ushtana) of my life." Since in both these utterances, Ushtana is mentioned in the context of good thoughts, deeds, etc., it seems to represent some spiritual significance besides mere breath, a concept which may pre-date even Zoroaster's Reform, and may be common to both the Aryans.

## **Zoroastrian Impact on Jainism & Buddhism**

J. C. Tavadia has even drawn some parallels between Jain and Zoroastrian beliefs, though both of these ideologies are fundamentally different. ("Some Jaina parallels to Zoroastrian beliefs," *Journal of the K. R. Cama Oriental Institute*, 31, 1937, pp. 156-169). "The most famous of the Bodhisattvas commonly represented in the Kushan period, is the future Buddha Maitreya. His rise to prominence has often been associated with the contemporary belief in the Messiah among the Jews, and the soteriology of the Zoroastrian future saviour Saosyant. In the Mahayanist conception of the Bodhisattvas Amitabha and Avalokitesvara, who subsequently became enormously popular in the East, the influence of the Iranian Zurvan and Mithra has been detected." (Boyce, *Ibid*, 956).

## Mysticism in the Gathas and the Vedas

In *Zoroaster's Time And Homeland* (Naples, 1980), G. Gnoli points out yet another similarity between the two religious systems that has been overlooked or rejected by scholars so far, namely Gatha's mystic and ecstatic aspects. "Now Zoroaster is not only a thinker---- he is also a religious man who has a revelation and a visionary experience. The ecstatic and the thinker are united in him---- It cannot be denied that the Gathic type of religious experience fits into the wider and richer Indo-Iranian framework of the inner vision and the mind's light." (p. 191)

— He who participates in the *maga* acquires a magic power, *Khshthra*, by means of which he can obtain an "illumination" (*Chisti*), "a cognition outside the ordinary, a vision and a perception that are not mediate and not transmitted by the physical organs and senses." Gnoli sees a continuous religious conception based on inner sight from "*Khrateush Doithrabyo*" (eyes of the mind) in the *Zamyad Yasht* (*Yasht* 19, 94) with which *Astavat-ereta* will make the whole corporeal world imperishable to the idea that occurs in Pahlavi literature, or the *menog wenishnih* or of the *gyancasm*. In this way the *maga* appears as a condition of human beings which is different from the normal one, a state which we could define as ecstatic or as an active trance where the person finds himself in a condition of "purity", *abezagih* in Pahlavi, which has not so much to do with a purely ethical concept as with an effective reality at a psychical and mental level. In fact, *abezagih* is a technical term in Pahlavi religious literature that translates *maga* (*abezagih*, *abezag wehah*) and it contrasts clearly with its opposite *gumezahih* or *ebgatih*, the state of "mixture", *menog* and *getig*, that is caused by the Assault of *Ahriman*, so that it can rightly be interpreted as a condition of "separation" of the two levels of existence, *menog*, Av. *\*mainyavaka* "of the spirit, incorporeal", and *getig*, *\*gaethyaka* "corporeal." According to this interpretation, the man in the *menog* state is in communion with the *Amesha Spentas*, and it is precisely this which is, in my opinion, a part of the key that explains and gives meaning to the Gathic doctrine. The other part is what G. L. Windfuhr, following mostly in the footsteps of Lommel's works, is trying to discover in the double system of opposites, good and evil and mind and matter, that characterizes the doctrine of the *Amesha Spentas*, their close interrelations and their reciprocal conditioning." "What I should like to stress now is the possibility of interpreting the Zoroastrian message in a strictly soteriological sense, by emphasizing the central meaning that an experience of an ecstatic and mystic nature has in it: an experience that, through the concepts of *daena-*, which is typically Gathic, and of *Khvarenah*, which is not unknown in the Gathas, is probably related, in quite original ways, to the Indo-Iranian conceptions of inner light and mental vision." (pp. 194-6).

Gnoli further notes: “An extremely important essay for the study of ‘Aryan mysticism’ is Kuiper’s ‘The Bliss of Asha.’ Kuiper makes an excellent study of the idea of ‘the most blissful union with Asha’, (Y. 49, 8) and of the ‘bliss of Asha which manifests itself together with the lights’, (Y. 30, 1), both in its specific meaning in Zoroastrian teaching and in its Aryan background, which is dominated, in his opinion, by the mythological equivalence of the nether world and the night sky.” (Ibid, p. 199). “I have used and discussed this essay extensively, especially in connection with the interpretation of Av. ashavan that is largely devoted to some aspects of the Zoroastrian mystico-ecstatic experience, aspects that are ignored on account of a widespread prejudice about a supposed non-mystic nature of Zoroastrianism.” (p. 244).

“At any rate,” concludes Gnoli, “I am convinced that the study of the Iranian and Indian conceptions of Asha and Ruta, as well as that of mental light and inner vision, greatly enlarges that field of research so as to take in the whole horizon of Aryan mysticism,” (p. 245), which could ultimately enable us to draw parallels between the Zoroastrian and Vedantic mysticism.

I may add that even in the younger Avesta we find such parallels, such as between Tatvam Asi (I am that) and Man Ano Avayad Shudan (I want to be that) which we pray at the very conclusion of all Nyaeshes and Yashts, a belief which my Guru, Dasturji K. S. Dabu often impressed upon his audience in his speeches and writing. (What a Zoroastrian prays at dawn in the Hoshbam prayer, i.e. or Yasna 57.9, also come very close to the spirit of Vedanta: “With best Asha, with most beautiful Asha, may we have Your Darshan (perception, vision), may we go around you, (and) get united with You forever!” (For the role of Sraosha in Gathic mysticism, see my forthcoming publication).

Even when the concept of Sraosha was expressed in concrete terms in the Younger Avesta as in Yasna 57.9 (which describes the abode of Sraosha as in the thousand pillared house on the top of the mountain, shining from within by its own light), all such stately symbolism still suggests Sraosha as a state of super-consciousness or bliss, much as an Indian rishi will attain a state of Ananda. In the Younger Avesta, the word Sraosha is always followed by the word Ashim, which could suggest the spiritual reward of eternal bliss associated with following Sraosha.

In conclusion, the similarity between Gathic and Eastern thought is quite outstanding. I hope this review will inspire others to pursue this subject further.

★★★★