

Afterlife Conceptions in the Vedas

Gregory Shushan*

University of Oxford

Abstract

Continuity and change in ancient Indian afterlife conceptions are discussed in a broad overview of the most relevant Vedic texts (the *Rig Veda*, the *Krishna Yajur Veda*, the *Atharva Veda*, the *Shatapatha Brahmana*, the *Jaiminiya Brahmana* and the *Upanishads*). Despite the introduction of (or re-emphasis on) certain ideas, such as reincarnation and *moksha* (liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth), there is also continuity of a core set of conceptions from the earliest texts to the latest. Return-from-death narratives are also found in each textual strand, and are discussed separately.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to present a broad overview of afterlife conceptions from the *Rig Veda* through the *Upanishads*. Of all Indian texts, only the Vedas have the status of *shruti* – texts which have been ‘heard’, i.e. through divine revelation. They are fixed, sacred texts, with no variation between editions.¹ This is in contrast to the Epics and *Puranas* which are *smriti* – human thoughts in response to *shruti*.

The Vedic texts contain the earliest expressions of Indian religious thought, and are thus important to our understanding of afterlife beliefs in Indian religions *per se*. Indeed, while the afterlife conceptions found later in the Epics (most notably the *Mahabharata*, but also the *Ramayana*), and particularly in the *Puranas* are both more extensive and more detailed – particularly in descriptions of tortures in hellish realms – there is also a good deal of structural continuity throughout.²

The Vedic texts originated from different geographical areas, and therefore embody some local cultural diversity;³ though little is known about the society from which they emerged. While it is believed that it was uncentralized, stateless and village based, nothing conclusive can be said regarding Vedic religious belief reflecting social structure.⁴

There are also problems with interpretation. There is no Vedic ‘guidebook’ to the afterlife comparable to the so-called Egyptian or Tibetan *Books of The Dead*, for example; and no systematic narrative description of what was believed to happen to a person’s consciousness at death and following. Furthermore, texts such as the *Rig Veda* are thought to have been deliberately ambiguous, so that there is thus no single correct interpretation of them.⁵ In addition, a thorough understanding of the extent of the use of symbolism in the texts (let alone the individual meanings and significance of all the symbols themselves) has not been achieved by current scholarship. In other words, when are we to take something literally, and when are we to consider it as metaphorical; and how are we to identify symbols, and interpret and understand the symbolism? Ultimately, the best we can do is to use our limited grasp of the existing evidence – the sometimes brief passages, and sometimes more lengthy narrative descriptions of afterlife experiences and realms found scattered throughout the various texts – in order to attempt to

(re)construct some kind of coherent vision of what the Vedic authors conceived about an afterlife.

While these texts certainly show change and elaboration over time, there is also significant continuity which tends to be underplayed in summaries of Hindu beliefs (there have been very few attempts to summarize specifically Vedic afterlife conceptions⁶). Indeed, because of the recurrence of certain themes and imagery, a fully comprehensive review of references to ideas about an afterlife in all Vedic texts would be repetitive.

The Vedas

The earliest relevant text is the *Rig Veda*, the oldest portions of which are believed to date to around 1500 BCE.⁷ It is a collection of over a thousand hymns, written to be recited by priests during sacrifices. In general, it is more concerned with life in the earthly realm than with an afterlife, and the hymns mainly relate to gods granting health, wealth, longevity and children. More than any other Vedic text, the afterlife descriptions in the *Rig Veda* are scattered – often consisting of only a few lines here and there.

In a prayer to go to the world of the immortals, the realm of the dead is said to be located in the ‘spheres above which firmly support the heavens’ (V.15.2) and in the ‘third heaven of heaven’. It is described as a realm of ‘inextinguishable light’, joy, freedom and fulfilled desires, flowing with cosmic waters, where the deceased are ‘fed and satisfied’, and cared for by the Lord of the Dead, Yama (hence the name of the realm, *Yamaloka*). Each person follows his/her own path on the smoke of the cremation fire, and it takes 3 days to reach *Yamaloka*. The journey is not without dangers, and the deceased is threatened by various demons, and by the ‘dark messengers of Yama with flaring nostrils’ – four-eyed dogs which thirst ‘for the breath of life’. However, Yama also entrusts the dogs to ‘watch over’ the deceased on the remainder of the journey (X.14.9–12), indicating that they functioned as both guards and guides, just as dogs do in earthly life.

Yamaloka itself is ‘adorned by days, waters and nights’, suggesting that it follows earthly cycles, and is an idealized mirror-image of earth, with horses and pastures, grass and trees (X.14.1–9, 10.56). Upon arrival there, the deceased will join Yama, Varuna (god of *rita*, moral and cosmic order), and various other gods and ancestors in feasting and drinking Soma. Soma was both an intoxicating, life-giving ritual drink, and a deity associated with the drink.⁸

The deceased is instructed: ‘Unite with the Fathers, with Yama, with the rewards of your sacrifices and good deeds, in the highest heaven. Leaving behind all imperfections, go back home again; merge with a glorious body’ (X.14.3–16). Whether the passage suggests reincarnation on earth,⁹ or perhaps a spiritual ‘body’ in a spiritual home,¹⁰ is unclear.

Early ideas of rebirth which prefigure those found later in the *Upanishads* are also apparent in a cremation ritual hymn (X.16.2–9). The deceased is told:

May your eye go to the sun, your life’s breath to the wind. Go to the sky or to the earth, as is your nature; or go to the waters, if that is your fate. Take roots in the plants with your limbs.¹¹

The passage is followed by a prayer for the deceased to go ‘to the world of those who have done good deeds ... to reach his own descendants, dressing himself in a life-span ... let him join with a body’. The text continues ‘Let him go to those whose king is Yama, carrying away all impurities’ – possibly suggesting that *Yamaloka* was a purificatory intermediate realm prior to earthly rebirth. The passage also seems to convey the idea that the human is a microcosm to the macrocosm of the natural world and its cycles – perhaps a

precursor to the concepts of *atman* and *brahman* in the *Brahmanas* and *Upanishads* (see below).¹²

The fact that Yamaloka is also the realm of the sun (IX.113.7–11) serves to associate death with light and cyclical rebirth, drawing a parallel with the sun's eternal cycle of rising and setting. Elsewhere (VIII.48.3) the text states, 'We have drunk Soma; we have become immortal; we have gone to the light; we have found the gods'. Soma enables the deceased to see the light of heaven and to find the sun (IX.104, 14). This is done by sailing on a boat on the primaevial ocean.¹³

The idea of 'redeath' (*punarmrtyu*) is also related to concepts of rebirth, though the lack of an explicit description of the process means that it is not entirely clear what actually happens upon the 'second death'.¹⁴ Is it a reincarnation in a new body on earth, i.e. which would ultimately bring about a repeated death? Or does one 'die' again into some other afterlife state or realm? Whatever the case, it was something to be avoided as evidenced by offering rituals intended to prevent it from occurring, and to ensure that the deceased remains in a positive afterlife realm. The rituals assisted the deceased in moving beyond the limbo-like condition of being a *preta* – an intermediary disembodied state at risk of *punarmrtyu* – to becoming a *pitr*, i.e. one of the 'Fathers' or ancestors.¹⁵

The reference to 'the rewards of your sacrifices and good deeds' mentioned above indicates that there is some kind of moral or ethical consideration in determining one's afterlife fate. Elsewhere (I.125.5–6) it states that those who are generous gain immortality 'on the high ridge of heaven' where 'the waters flow for him with ghee'.¹⁶ All that the deceased has given in this world results in abundant return in *Svargaloka* (or simply *Svarga*, a heavenly realm), a place of 'splendours' and a shining sun. The realm of Vishnu is another positive afterlife destination, and is a place 'where men who love the gods rejoice', and where 'the fountain of honey' is to be found in the god's 'highest footstep' (I.154.5).¹⁷

Conversely, a reference to 'those who are evil, without order or truth' having caused 'a deep place' to exist (IV.5.5) suggests the possibility of punishment in a subterranean hellish place, as does a reference to a 'monstrous abyss' (I.185). This abyss is said to be located 'below the three earths' (X.152.4), the same location as *Naraka*, the hellish realm, in the Epics and Puranas.¹⁸ There are also prayers against 'falling into the pit', for protection from 'the devouring wolf', and for the flames of Agni (god of fire, light and the sun) to annihilate evil-doers by burning them 'to nothingness' (II.29.6; X.87.14).¹⁹ One hymn (VII.104) lists punishments for demons in the pit, with specific torments corresponding to specific sins. The 'human'-type sins suggest that these are warnings of potential punishments the deceased may face, and indeed the formula is familiar from later texts on punishment of the souls of evil or untruthful humans.²⁰ For example, one is boiled in a pot for eating meat, hating priests and possessing the evil eye; 'evil-doers' are pierced and thrown into an abyss for eternity; liars 'become nothing' since they 'talk about nothing'; seducers and corrupters are devoured by a serpent or annihilated; and so on.

We must, however, resist seeing the *Rig Vedic* afterlife as a simple dualistic heaven-and-hell conception. As well as the fact that at least some of these punishments result in annihilation or non-existence, the deceased might also travel to the sky, the earth, the ocean, the sun, the dawn, 'the flowing streams of light,' plants, mountains, 'the whole moving universe,' 'distances beyond the beyond,' the past and the future (X.58). In effect, the deceased become gods (or at least godlike). They share Indra's chariot, and live on ritual offerings made to them by the living (e.g. X.18.13; X.15.8–11, 68.11). There is thus a multiplicity of possible fates, some of which may be experienced in succession, or to different elements of the deceased.

In the *Krishna Yajur Veda* (c. 900 BCE), a collection of ritual instruction texts, afterlife fates are determined by the proper conducting of rituals. This includes not only following correct procedures, but also possessing accurate knowledge as to the meanings of the rituals. Thus, those who fail to burn the plants after placing them on the altar to Yama will, in the afterlife, be bound by the neck and dragged by those plants. On the other hand, those who know the identities of the gods will have all the sacrifices they made upon earth returned to them in the afterlife (III.3.8). For example, if a cow is sacrificed, it is there to be milked in Svargaloka (V.7.3). This earthly-afterlife correspondence extends also to the deceased: in a reference to cremation, the one who 'piles up the fire with itself and with a body; becomes his body in the yonder world' (V.4.1).

Though dating from c. 900 BCE the *Atharva Veda* may actually contain concepts and ideas even older than the *Rig Veda*.²¹ It is a comparatively 'popular' text which includes a more elaborate description of Svargaloka than previously seen, and more clearly differentiated realms: Yamaloka is now more explicitly distinct from both Naraka and Svargaloka.

Rather than ascending on the cremation smoke as in *Rig Veda*, the deceased here ascends on rays of light, passing the 'great darkness' (XI.1.37; IX.5.1); or is raised up by storm-gods called *Maruts* (XVIII.2.21–6).

The deceased is led by 37 deities (XII.3.16–17), and a sacrificial goat which 'smites away the darkness' and announces the deceased to the Fathers (X.5.1–11). After encountering Yama, moral transgressors proceed to hellish realms called *Paravátas* (XII.5.64). They encounter danger from lightning, from Yama's dogs (now named as Shyama and Shabala), and from descending into darkness and to 'the house infernal' from which there is no return. There one encounters 'a fiend with snapping jaws', 'wild-haired women,' 'dismal howlers', 'Decay', witches, 'evil ghosts' (VIII.1.3; 1.9–19; 2.10–24), and various other terrors (cf. VIII.1.12). The immoral are also described as sitting in a river flowing with blood, eating hair (V.19.3; VIII.4.9).

Svargaloka is described in the *Atharva Veda* (IV.34.5–6) as being filled with lotus ponds, lakes of ghee with 'banks of honey', and streams of wine, milk, water and curds. The roads, buildings and the ship of the gods are all made of gold (V.4.4–5). The spirit is reunited with family members there, and experiences eternal 'goodness' (VI.120.1–3), enjoying the company of Apsarasas (semi-divine nymphs) and Gandharvas (soma-drinking heavenly musicians), and riding celestial chariots or flying through the skies with wings (IV.34.2–4).

The Brahmanas

The *Brahmanas* (c. 900–700 BCE) are priestly expositions on the Vedas, intended to explain the meanings of the rituals. In the *Shatapatha Brahmana*, a ship which carries the deceased to Svargaloka is composed of elements of the fire-sacrifice ritual (the *Agnihotra*): its sides are the flames, and its steersman the milk-offerer (II.3.3.15–16). *Pitaraloka*, or the world of the Fathers, is said to be located within Yama's realm (XII.8.1.19) as well as being associated with a pit (III.6.1.13–14), indicating that it was not an entirely pleasant place.²² It is ruled over by Aditi, the goddess of infinity (XIII.4.3.9).

The text also gives us the first description of the process of judgement, in which the deceased is weighed in a balance (XI.2.7; XII.9.1). The dead also pass through two fires: the good will accomplish this easily and proceed to *Pitaraloka* or to the sun; though the wicked are burned (I.9.3.2). We are also told that, 'whatever food a man consumes in

this world...consumes him in yonder world' (XII.9.1.8) – presumably a vegetarian stricture. Other risks include demons and evil spirits called Asuras and Rakshas (I.6.1.11).

The *Shatapatha Brahmana* also explains that stars are the lights of righteous men in Svargaloka (VI.5.4.8), and that the rays of the sun are their souls (I.9.3.11). The sun's rays are also said to be gods, associating the dead with the divine. The sun is considered to be the 'final goal' causing one 'to die again and again in yonder world', another association between rebirth and the sun's nightly cyclical journey through the sky and underworld (IX.4.2.5). Death is said to occur in all three worlds (XIII.3.5.1.d), suggesting that after-life realms are not eternal, but intermediate phases of death and rebirth. The ignorant and evil are said to 'come to life when they die again, and they become food time after time' (X.1.4.12; cf. *Upanishads*, below), possibly another early reference to reincarnation. The especially pious individual is reborn as Agni, complete with a mate and children (X.1.4.12; VIII.6.1.21).

The *Jaiminiya Brahmana* contains material of a more folkloristic and mythological nature. It describes how the deceased's life-breath ascends to Svargaloka and reports to the gods on his good and evil deeds. The deceased asks doorkeepers, who are personifications of the seasons, to lead him to immortality. They take him to the sun, who asks 'Who are you?' If the deceased gives his name, the sun replies that though the *atman* originated in the sun, it will remain with the *atman*. The doorkeepers will then rush at the deceased from all directions, and drag him away. *Atman* is the inner unchanging self. The deceased's reply should have demonstrated his knowledge that the *atman* is one and the same as the sun – which is here synonymous with *brahman*, the Absolute, or ultimate reality. This would have caused a merging with the sun, and the formation of a 'second self'. The realization that the *atman* is *brahman*, i.e. of the individual's essential oneness with the universal divine, is a key concept of the *Upanishads*.

Those of limited knowledge and piety are greeted by the seasons on a ray of light. The seasons ask the deceased to reveal his name, and if he refuses they strike him with hammers. His merits then split into three parts, which either dissipate, go to the seasons, or accompany him to Svargaloka. An alternative possibility for one with 'some (but not perfect) knowledge' is for his merits to go back to earth with the deceased to continue 'repeated dying' (I.18), perhaps the most unambiguous reference to reincarnation so far.

When a mystic 'shakes off the body' after death, he travels from the cremation smoke into the night, then to the day, to the 'half-month of the waning moon to the half-month of the waxing moon', and then to the month. This idea of different elements of the self going to different times/places, and having different experiences at once, recalls the cremation ritual hymn in the *Rig Veda* (X.16), and is almost exactly mirrored (and expanded upon) in the *Upanishads*. In 'the month', 'both the body and the life-spirit come together', and again one of the hammer-wielding seasons arrives on a ray of light, asking the mystic his identity. This time, the correct response concerns the association of semen with King Soma (the divine manifestation of soma, the drink), and his identification as the deceased's father. The response demonstrates that the deceased possesses the knowledge and understanding of the seasons themselves. The seasons give King Soma to the deceased, confer immortality upon him and admit him to Svargaloka, for 'He who knows thus is not a human being' but is 'one of the gods'.

In Svargaloka, the man's ancestors greet him and ask, 'What have you brought us?' The reply should be: 'Whatever good I have done, that is yours'. The ancestors thus benefit from the deceased's good deeds, while his evil deeds go to his enemies, and he himself ultimately goes to dwell with the sun (I.46).

The Upanishads

The *Upanishads* represent the end of the Veda, or *Vedanta* – the culmination of Vedic philosophy, largely concerned with existential questions such as the origins and nature of our existence, and our ultimate fate. They were written in different regions over a period of at least 500 years, beginning around 700 BCE. Though there is diversity between texts as well as changes from what we have seen so far, the *Upanishads* are generally less concerned with ritual. One's afterlife destiny is now dependent not only on moral behaviour – exemplified by the doctrine of *karma* – but also upon spiritual enlightenment, a concept prefigured in the *Krishna Yajur Veda* by the requirement of knowledge of the meanings of rituals, and in the *Jaiminiya Brahmana* concerning the nature of *atman*. The concept of transmigration is also more explicit, as is that of *moksha* – liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth (*punarjanma*).

The *Chandogya Upanishad* tells us that there are two paths upon which the deceased might travel, that of the Fathers and that of the Gods. The spirit is 'deeply serene' and after leaving the body, 'reaches the highest light, emerges in his own true appearance ... He roams about there, laughing, playing and enjoying himself with women, carriages, or relatives, without remembering the appendage that is the body'. 'Joy and sorrow...do not affect one who has no body' (VIII.12.1–2). The process of afterlife transformation is described as passing 'from the dark into the multicoloured' and back again. The afterlife state is one of freedom, perfection of the self and the realization of *brahman* (VIII.15).

Now when the spirit ascends on the rays of light, it is accompanied by the mystical, all-encompassing divine sound 'OM' (or 'AUM'). Pitaloka is now explicitly characterized as an intermediate realm prior to rebirth. For the spiritually enlightened, the sun is a doorway; for others it is a barrier (VIII.6.4–5). Expanding upon the *Jaiminiya Brahmana* (I.46), here the deceased moves from the month into the year, and then the sun, the moon and lightning. There he/she is met by a 'person who is not human', and is led 'to the worlds of *brahman*' (V.10.1).²³

There are various fates depending on one's level of piety and devotion, though they are mainly variations of what have seen already. One addition in the *Prashna Upanishad* (V.4.4) is when the unenlightened but pious reach the moon and become food for the gods. Even so, the spirit has the power to command the moon to continue its cycle of waxing and waning.

Those who are attached to earthly possessions, concerns, and desires travel with the effects of their earthly behaviour 'to that very place to which his mind and character cling' before being reborn. Those who focus on ritual offerings take the path of the Fathers which leads to the moon, which is 'substance' (perhaps a reference to physical rebirth). 'Those who seek the self by means of austerity, chastity, faith, knowledge' take the path of the gods to the sun, 'where they gain immortality and are free from fear' (I.6–10).

According to the *Bhadaranyaka Upanishad* (III.1.6), thought is the creative and active force, so that Svargaloka is reached 'by means of the mind, by means of the moon', resulting in 'complete freedom'. The self is the 'inner controller, the immortal', with power over the elements and over the 'intermediate region' (III.7.3ff.).²⁴ When the merit accumulated by the person's earthly life is used up, he or she is rained upon earth to be reincarnated. The good attain a positive rebirth, though the unenlightened and impious are reborn as beasts (V I.2.15–16).

In the *Kausitaki Upanishad*, it is now the moon asking the deceased's identity, with *moksha* or rebirth depending on the reply (I.2). The correct answer is 'I am the season!

Who am I? I am you!', demonstrating the realization of the nature of *atman* and the association of the self with the divine. Those who answer wrongly are reincarnated on earth, while those who answer correctly pass through various elements and the worlds of various gods (I.3). A lake and the river of immortality (Vijara) must also be crossed, using only the power of the mind. The ignorant and unenlightened are unable to cross, and they drown. For those who succeed, the river purifies the spirit of both good and bad deeds, which fall upon loved and unloved relatives, respectively. The deceased then 'looks down and observes the days and nights, the good and bad deeds, and all the pairs of opposites', suggesting something like a transcendent, panoramic life review. Various gods and demi-gods then bring flowers to the deceased, encouraged by Brahma who tells them 'Run to him with my glory! He has already arrived at the river! He will never grow old!' Five-hundred Apsarasas appear, bearing fruits, ointments, garlands, clothing, and perfumes. 'Decked with the ornaments of *brahman*', the deceased 'who has the knowledge of *brahman*, goes on to *brahman*' (I.4). Various fragrant and radiant divine palaces, gardens, rivers and lakes are visited, and the deceased is eventually seated upon the throne of *brahman* (I.5).

The deceased is once again asked, 'Who are you?' – this time by *brahman* itself. The deceased is now to answer:

I am the season! I am the offspring of the season. I was born from the womb of space as the semen for the wife, as the radiance of the year, as the *atman* of every being! You are the self of every being. I am who you are.

The question is repeated, and the deceased replies, 'The real... the full extent of the whole world. And you are this whole world' (I.6). After further questions, the deceased is finally told by *brahman* 'I see that you have truly attained my world. It is yours!' (I.7). The deceased has thus reached liberation – a state beyond description.

Hellish realms and experiences play little role in the *Upanishads*. 'People who worship ignorance' go to dark, joyless places. The darkness is even worse for those 'who delight in learning', and paradoxically, for 'those who are not learned or wise' (*Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishad* VI.2.2; IV.4.9–10). In the later *Isa Upanishad* (3), suicides and the ignorant are said to go to dark, 'demonic' realms; and still later (*Maitri Upanishad* IV.2), Yamaloka becomes exclusively a place 'of great fear', in contrast to its earlier more diverse character.

Afterlife Journey Narratives

An interesting stream running through all these texts is the 'afterlife journey' narrative, in which a particular individual leaves the body, travels to afterlife realms, and sometimes returns to the body.²⁵ The primary function of these narratives is to provide religious or spiritual guidance through knowledge of what to expect after death.

The earliest, found in a hymn in the *Rig Veda* (X.135), describes how a boy goes to Yamaloka in order to find his father, who went there out of a longing to be with his ancestors. The journey is undertaken in a chariot constructed by the boy's mind (i.e. leaving his body) which can 'travel in all directions'. Yama sits beneath a tree in his realm, drinking with other gods, and playing on a reed flute.

The *Shatapatha Brahmana* (XI) relates an afterlife journey which includes a description of Naraka. Varuna sends his son Bhrgu on a journey to 'all directions' so that he will gain knowledge. In each, Bhrgu sees men dismembering and devouring each other, 'sitting in silence' or crying loudly. In the northeast, the direction of Svargaloka, lies Yamaloka. Yama himself is described as a black man with yellow eyes and a stick, symbolizing

wrath. He stands between an ugly woman and a beautiful woman, who symbolize faith and lack of faith.

The *Jaiminiya Brahmana* (I.42–44) contains a more elaborate version of this narrative, involving the same protagonists. Here, Varuna takes away Bhrgu's 'lifebreaths', which causes his journey to the beyond. The boy is incredulous as he travels to each of the directions, and asks repeatedly, 'Has this really happened? What is the meaning of this?' He is answered (presumably by the inhabitants of each respective realm), 'Ask your father Varuna. He will explain it to you'.

In the first three realms, those who carry out the *Agnihotra* ritual in ignorance are dismembered and devoured by men who used to be trees, animals, rice, and barley which were not used according to proper ritual strictures. This is a reversal of the earthly order, in which sacrificers are now eaten by sacrifices. In the fourth realm, Yama, Faith and No-faith are encountered as in the *Shatapatha Brahmana*. In the fifth realm are 'two streams flowing on an even level'. One is filled with the blood of those who have shed the blood of Brahmins, and is guarded by 'a naked black man with a club' (presumably Yama). The other is filled with ghee from which golden men fill their golden cups with 'all desires'. Only the exceptionally worthy gain the sixth realm – a place of beautiful fragrances, music, dancing and singing Apsarases, where there are 'five rivers with blue and white lotuses, flowing with honey like water'.

Another of this type of narrative is found in the *Katha Upanishad* (I–VI).²⁶ It occurs in a dialogue between Yama and a young Brahmin called Naciketas, who is sent by his father to Yamaloka. The boy arrives while Yama is away, and is left unattended without food for 3 days. When Yama returns, to compensate for his lapse in hospitality he grants Naciketas three wishes. Naciketas wishes for his father's kindness, and for the secrets of the fire-altar and of immortality.

Yama explains that the altar's fire 'leads to heaven, to the attainment of an endless world,' a place of merriment where fear, hunger, thirst, sorrow and old age do not exist. Yama is reluctant to answer Naciketas' questions concerning whether or not one 'exists' in death, and 'what happens at that great transit'; though he does explain the concept of *atman* in relation to the afterlife – that it continues even in death and is immortal, and that understanding this leads to 'that final step, from which he is not reborn again' (i.e. *moksha*). 'A certain wise man in search of immortality', Yama tells the boy, 'turned his sight inward and saw the self within'.

In the form of a swan, the enlightened deceased 'dwells in the light' as a god in the sky. The unenlightened, who view reality as 'diverse', will experience death after death. Some are reincarnated, while 'Others pass into a stationary thing'. On the various states of being the text explains: 'As in a mirror, so in the body; As in a dream, so in the Father's world; As in water a thing becomes somewhat visible, so in the Gandharva world; Somewhat as in shadows and light, so in *brahman's* world'.

Summary and Conclusion

What can we generalize about Vedic afterlife conceptions? Some thematic, structural elements found throughout the texts include: ascent and descent to upper and lower realms; existence in non-physical states; dissolution into component parts which go to different places; encounters with deities and ancestors; barriers, obstacles, perils and demons of various kinds; an afterlife fate determined by moral, religious or spiritual merit; and identification of the deceased with various deities, celestial bodies, seasons, natural phenomena, etc., indicating a transcendental, godlike state. This continuity of tradition is reflected in

the common backdrop of the return-from-death narratives, and the theme of passing from one state to the next (the moon, the lightning, the month etc.).

The simultaneous multiplicity and universality of the divine, integration and the reconciliation of opposites are also all key themes throughout the texts, reflected in the ideas of the deceased as microcosmic counterpart to the divine, and afterlife realms as idealized or inverted reflections of the earth. The Fathers, Yama and Varuna are all associated with both the upper and lower realms in the early literature; and deities and realms are frequently associated with their opposites, so that the underworld is in the sky in the *Rig Veda*, while two words for 'heaven' – *Paraloká* and *asáuloká* – actually refer to under-worlds in the *Jaiminiya Brahmana*.

Descriptions of paradisiacal realms are fairly consistent from the earliest texts to the latest, and it has been argued that the concept of rebirth, in particular, is a continuous stream from the *Rig Veda* onwards.²⁷ Despite references to immortality and to the world of the immortals in the *Rig Veda*, there are early indications of a belief in rebirth as the inevitable conclusion to a temporary stay in a heavenly realm (at least for those who escape annihilation), the length of which is determined by one's ritual conduct on earth.²⁸

Beliefs also changed over time. For example, the character and function of Yamaloka, an afterlife goal in the *Rig Veda*, was transformed in the *Upanishads* into a negative intermediate state for the unworthy prior to a low rebirth. A heavenly state was retained as a temporary reward for positive earthly behaviour prior to *moksha* or a high rebirth.

A clear development in the *Brahmanas* and *Upanishads* is an increasingly greater stress on enlightenment and wisdom over correct ritual behaviour and morality. Rather than piety or good deeds, it is the realization of the nature of *atman* and the knowledge of immortality which ensure a positive afterlife experience. It is not that the Upanishadic system became ethically or morally neutral, however, for presumably the immoral and unethical would not become enlightened to begin with. It is more a matter of re-emphasis, with the *Rig Vedic* fears of annihilation (the abyss, being devoured or burnt to nothingness) and the various terrors described in the *Krishna Yajur Veda* and *Atharva Veda* giving way to a longing for unity of the self with the infinite. In the *Brahmanas* and *Upanishads*, the early microcosm/macrocosm theme developed into the concept that *atman* = *brahman*. With the *Upanishads*, the ultimate goal shifted to liberation from rebirth and into a state of divine transcendence. In effect, the introduction of the concept of *moksha* may thus be seen as a reconciliation of the *Rig Vedic* fear of non-existence. There is, in any case, thematic continuity throughout, for whether the key factor is ritual behaviour, morality or enlightenment, one's afterlife experiences are always determined by degree of merit.

We must be careful not to assume that the re-emphases and reorientations are evolutionary stages of development, for most of the concepts are evident throughout the texts, and were co-existent.²⁹ For example, the *Rig Veda* contains not only a microcosm/macrocosm conceptual precursor to *atman/brahman*, but also some requirement of religious wisdom for a positive afterlife (knowing the meanings behind the rituals), as well as hints of reincarnation beliefs.

Nor is it appropriate to generalize about Vedic afterlife beliefs as a simple heaven-and-hell dichotomy. With the multiple realms and experiences described, this seems never to have been relevant. Even amongst the different Upanishads we find different possible afterlife fates (e.g. the choice between one of two paths in the *Chandogya Upanishad* as opposed to the mind-dependent freedom described in *Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishad*), so that it is problematic to speak of a single or definitive 'Upanishadic eschatology'. One should

therefore resist the temptation to over-categorize and over-systematize Vedic afterlife conceptions. The fact that some of these beliefs may never have been entirely discrete, and may even appear to be conflicting, means that they *cannot* be reconciled in any empirical, systematic way.³⁰ Instead, it is more productive to regard the afterlife conceptions in the way they are presented in the texts: a series of diverse, often intermediate states and experiences (some of which are specific to particular textual strands).

Short Biography

Gregory Shushan is author of the Grawemeyer Award nominated *Conceptions of the Afterlife in Early Civilizations: Universalism, Constructivism, and Near-Death Experience* (Continuum Advances in Religious Studies, 2009). He has been Visiting Lecturer in Religious Studies at University of Wales Lampeter, Lecturer in the Study of Religions at University College Cork where he helped establish the first such department in the Republic of Ireland, guest lecturer in Anthropology of Religions at Swiss University and Research Fellow at the Centro Incontri Umani (The Cross Cultural Centre) at Ascona, Switzerland. He has presented his research at 10 conferences in seven countries, and is the recipient of six academic awards and prizes. He holds a Diploma in Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology from Birkbeck College (London), a BA in Egyptian Archaeology and an MA in Research Methods for the Humanities from University College London and a PhD in Religious Studies from University of Wales Lampeter. He is currently Perrott-Warrick Researcher at the Ian Ramsey Centre for Science and Religion, University of Oxford, researching comparative afterlife beliefs in small-scale societies worldwide in the context of shamanic and near-death experiences.

Notes

* Correspondence address: Gregory Shushan, Perrott-Warrick Researcher, Ian Ramsey Centre for Science and Religion, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK. E-mail: gregory.shushan@theology.ox.ac.uk

¹ For an introduction to Vedic texts, see Witzel (2003; changes in afterlife beliefs are discussed on p. 84–6); and Jamison and Witzel (1992) for a more comprehensive overview of Vedic religion, largely in the form of bibliographic essay.

² See Hopkins (1992) for a review of afterlife beliefs in Hinduism *per se*.

³ See Witzel (1997) on the social, political and geographical contexts of the Vedas; and Bryant (2001) for a summary of the evidence and arguments concerning the origins of Vedic culture.

⁴ Flood (1996, p. 50 and Ch. 2 on the Ancient Origins of Hinduism).

⁵ O'Flaherty (1981, p. 16).

⁶ Perhaps the most succinct review is Werner (1978). See Bodewitz' various articles for in-depth studies of particular aspects of afterlife beliefs in the *Rig Veda* and *Atharva Veda*; Butzenberger (1996, 1998), whose interpretations are often at odds with Bodewitz; and Borman (1989) specifically on the *Upanishads*. See also Shushan (2009, Ch. 6) for a more detailed phenomenological overview than is possible here, in the context of cross-cultural comparison (Ch. 9–12).

⁷ See Bryant (2001) for debates regarding the date of the *Rig Veda*.

⁸ See Thompson (2003) and Nicholson (2002) on the identification of the soma plant and drink, and its properties.

⁹ See especially Bodewitz (1986, 1996, 1998) and Jurewicz (2008) on these early references to reincarnation and rebirth in the Vedas; cf. Butzenberger (1998), Ikari (1989) and Werner (1978).

¹⁰ On the nature of the deceased in the afterlife, see De Mora (1986, p. 468) and Butzenberger (1996, p. 71), who both argue that (in the *Rig Veda*) it is the *physical* individual having these afterlife experiences. This is contra Werner (1978, pp. 278–9) who stresses the multiple components of the deceased; and Bodewitz (1999b, p. 109) who points out numerous references to 'souls' in Vedic texts. There is little to suggest a Vedic belief in physical postmortem resurrection.

¹¹ See Werner (1978) for a discussion of this passage as 'the dispersal of the constituents of the phenomenal personality'.

- ¹² However, see Butzenberger (1996) who interprets the passage as indicating that the deceased is absorbed into the macrocosm and therefore does not survive. This, however, seems to contradict references to immortality.
- ¹³ See Bodewitz (1994).
- ¹⁴ Lopez (1997).
- ¹⁵ See O'Flaherty (1980), especially on the *pinda* (rice ball) offering ritual and its relationship to ideas of procreation and birth.
- ¹⁶ Clarified butter, which is sometimes used in rituals involving anointments or libations.
- ¹⁷ A reference to the 'three strides' it took Vishnu to cross the universe.
- ¹⁸ See Merh (1996), especially Part I, 'Yama in the Vedas'.
- ¹⁹ Accepting the concept of 'hells' in the *Rig Veda*, Werner (1978, pp. 281–2) nevertheless claimed that references to 'annihilation' or 'destruction' are 'figurative'; though it seems clear that they are to be taken literally as simply another diverse possible fate, depending on the individual. See Bodewitz (1999a). Cf. Day (1982), especially Ch. 4A, 'The Twenty-One Hells'; and Brown (1941).
- ²⁰ See, for example, *Mahabharata* 7.322.
- ²¹ See Bodewitz (1999a).
- ²² See Bodewitz (1999b).
- ²³ Cf. *Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishad* (VI.2.15–16).
- ²⁴ Cf. *Chandogya Upanishad* (II.24.9).
- ²⁵ See Shushan (2009, esp. Ch. 10) for an interpretation of these narratives in light of various constructivist theories as well as shamanic-type and near-death experiences. Cf. Nicholson (2002) and Thompson (2003) on whether or not certain Vedic texts may be of a soma-induced 'visionary' or 'shamanic' nature.
- ²⁶ Alternative versions exist in the *Chandogya Upanishad* (5.3) and the *Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishad* (6.2).
- ²⁷ Werner (1978, pp. 285–88).
- ²⁸ Witzel (2003, p. 84), citing the *Maitrayani Samhita* (1.8.6), characterises the earlier system of rebirth as an 'automatic, continuous cycle'.
- ²⁹ See Werner (1978, pp. 285–6, *passim*).
- ³⁰ Butzenberger (1996) attempted such an exhaustive systematization, concluding that the most 'common and popular' conception was in fact a combination of various apparently conflicting elements (p. 97). His frustration with the task is evident, however, in his assertion that the inability of modern scholars to fully comprehend the texts is due to their not being 'refined philosophical systems', and that certain problems were 'not thought out carefully' by the ancient authors (p. 84). In contrast, Werner (1978, p. 280) wrote: 'The fact that it was expressed and preserved for us only in a non-systematic way ... must not prevent us from seeing that the actual knowledge was there and that this knowledge was far from primitive.'

Works Cited

PRIMARY SOURCES (IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION)

- Bodewitz, H. W. (trans.) (1973). *Jaiminiya Brahmana* 1, 1–63. Leiden: Brill.
- Egging, J. (trans./ed.) (1882–1900) *Satapatha Brahmana*. 5 vols. Sacred Books of the East XII, XXVI, XLI, XLIII, XLIV. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Griffith, R. T. (trans.) (1896; rpt. 1973) *The Hymns of the Rigveda*. New Delhi, Banarsidass. (complete, but outdated and notoriously often inaccurate) NB: a new, complete translation of the *Rig Veda* is forthcoming from Oxford University Press (Joel Brereton and Stephanie W. Jamison, *The Rig Veda: Translation and Explanatory Notes*, ISBN 0195179188).
- Keith, A. B. (1914). *The Veda of the Black Yajus School Entitled Taittiriya Sanhita*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- O'Flaherty, W. (trans./ed.) (1981). *The Rig Veda*. London: Penguin. (selections)
- Olivelle, P. (trans.) (1999). *The Early Upanishads*. Oxford: University Press.
- Panikkar, R. (trans./ed.) (1977). *The Vedic Experience*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd. (selections)
- Roebuck, V. J. (trans.) (2000). *The Upanishads*. New Delhi: Penguin.
- Witney, W. D. (trans.) (1905). *The Atharva Veda*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Oriental Series VII–VIII.

SECONDARY SOURCES

- Bodewitz, H. W. (1986). The Cosmic, Cyclical Dying (Parimara). In: W. Morgenroth (ed.), *Sanskrit and World Culture: Proceedings of the IVth World Sanskrit Conference of the International Association of Sanskrit Studies*, pp. 438–43. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag.
- . (1994). Life after Death in the Rgvedasamhita, *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens*, 38, 23–41.

- . (1996). Redearth and its Relation to Rebirth and Release, *Studien zur Indologie und Iranistik*, 20, 27–46.
- . (1998). The Hindu Doctrine of Transmigration: Its Origin and Background, *Indologica Taurinensia*, 23–24, 583–605.
- . (1999a). Pits, Pitfalls and the Underworld in the Vedas, *Indo-Iranian Journal*, 42(3), July, 211–26.
- . (1999b). Yonder World in the Atharva Veda, *Indo-Iranian Journal*, 42(2), April, 107–20.
- Borman, W. A. (1989). Upanishadic Eschatology. In: A. Berger, P. Badham, A.H. Kutscher, J. Berger, M. Perry and J. Beloff (eds.), *Perspectives on Death and Dying*, 89–100. Philadelphia: Charles.
- Brown, W. N. (1941). The Rigvedic Equivalent for Hell, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 61, 76–80.
- Bryant, E. (2001). *The Quest for the Origins of Vedic Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Butzenberger, K. (1996). Ancient Indian Conceptions on Man's Destiny after Death: The Beginnings and the Early Development of the Doctrine of Transmigration I, *Berliner Indologische Studien*, 9, 55–118.
- . (1998). Ancient Indian Conceptions on Man's Destiny after Death: The Beginnings and the Early Development of the Doctrine of Transmigration II, *Berliner Indologische Studien*, 11–12, 1–84.
- Day, T. P. (1982). *The Conception of Punishment in Early Indian Literature*. Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
- De Mora, J. M. (1986). On Death and Other Subjects in the *Rgveda*, *Sanskrit and World Culture, SCHR.OR* 18, S. 467–70.
- Flood, G. (1996). *An Introduction to Hinduism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hopkins, T. J. (1992). Hindu Views on Life after Death. In: H. Obayashi (ed.), *Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions*, pp. 143–56. New York: Greenwood.
- Ikari, Y. (1989). Some Aspects of the Idea of Rebirth in Vedic Literature, *Indo-Shidshi Kenkyū*, 6, 155–64.
- Jamison, S. & Witzel, M. (1992). Vedic Hinduism. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University. [Online]. Retrieved on 6 January 2011 from: <http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/%7Eewitzel/vedica.pdf>. A shorter version may be found in A. Sharma (ed.) (2003). *The Study of Hinduism*. University of South Carolina Press, 65–113.
- Jurewicz, J. (2008). Rebirth Eschatology in the *Rgveda*: In Search for the Roots of Transmigration, *Indologica Taurinensia*, 34, 183–210.
- Lopez, C. (1997). Food and Immortality in the Veda: A Gastronomical Theology? *Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies*, 3–3, 11–9. [Online]. Retrieved on 6 January 2011 from: <http://www.ejvs.laurasianacademy.com/ejvs0303/ejvs0303.txt>
- Merh, K. P. (1996). *Yama: The Glorious Lord of the Other World*. New Delhi: D.K.
- Nicholson, P. T. (2002). The Soma Code, *Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies*, 8(2), 31–92. [Online]. Retrieved on 6 January 2011 from: <http://www.ejvs.laurasianacademy.com/ejvs0803/ejvs0803.pdf>
- O'Flaherty, W. D. (1980). Karma and rebirth in the Vedas and Puranas. In: W.D. O'Flaherty (ed.) *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, pp. 3–37. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Shushan, G. (2009). *Conceptions of the Afterlife in Early Civilizations: Universalism, Constructivism, and Near-Death Experience*. London: Continuum.
- Thompson, G. (2003). Soma and Ecstasy in the *Rgveda*, *Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies*, 9(1e). [Online]. Retrieved on 6 January 2011 from: <http://www.ejvs.laurasianacademy.com/ejvs0901/ejvs0901e.txt>
- Werner, K. (1978). The Vedic Concept of Human Personality and its Destiny, *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 5(3), 275–89.
- Witzel, M. (1997). The Development of the Vedic Canon and its Schools: The Social and Political Milieu. In: M. Witzel (ed.), *Inside the Texts, Beyond the Texts. New Approaches to the Study of the Vedas*, vol. 2, pp. 257–345. Cambridge Mass: Harvard Oriental Series Opera Minora 2.
- . (2003). Vedas and Upanishads. In: G. Flood (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, pp. 68–98. Oxford: Blackwell.

Further Reading

- Bodewitz, H. W. (1991). *Light, Soul and Visions in the Veda*. Professor P.D. Gune Memorial Lectures 5th Series. Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute.
- . (2000). Distance and Death in the Veda, *Asiatische Studien*, 54, 103–17.
- . (2002). The Dark and Deep Underworld of the Vedas, *JAOs*, 122(2), April–June, 213–24.
- Killingley, D. (1997). The Paths of the Dead and the Five Fires. In: P. Connolly and S. Hamilton (eds.), *Indian Insights: Buddhism, Brahmanism and Bhakti: Papers from the Spalding Symposium on Indian Religions*, pp. 1–20. London: Luzac Oriental.
- Lincoln, B. (1982). The House of Clay, *Indo-Iranian Journal*, 29, 1–12.
- Schmidt, H.-P. (1997). Ahimsa and Rebirth. In: M. Witzel (ed.) *Inside the Texts Beyond the Texts: New Approaches to the Study of the Vedas*, vol. 2, pp. 209–10. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Oriental Series Opera Minora 2.
- Tull, H. W. (1989). *The Vedic Origins of Karma: Cosmos as Man in Ancient Indian Myth and Ritual*. Albany: SUNY.