THE CONCEPTS OF RTA AND MAAT: A STUDY IN COMPARISON

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The purpose of this paper is to attempt a comparative analysis of two very ancient religious concepts—the concept of Rta in Vedic Hinduism and Maat (also spelt Maet and Mayet) in Egyptian religion. This will be undertaken in four sections. The first two will probe into the concepts separately, focussing on the cluster of ideas relating to each concept as well as the relevant sociological background. In the third section the two concepts will be brought into sharper comparative focus. The final section will offer observations in an attempt to articulate the relevance of this study for contemporary biblical and theological reflection. Particular attempt will be made to relate to appropriate materials from the Hebrew Bible.

In this study, both the original terms are left untranslated because they are not readily translatable into English. There is no single English equivalent which can capture the semantic range and complexity of thought of the original terms.

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The word *Rta* is derived from a root meaning to run or go. In that fundamental sense it means the course of things in nature.¹ Originally the Indo-Aryans used the idea of *Rta* in the sense of a cosmic order.² This was based on the belief that the natural world operated according to an inherent order or system. The precision and regularity with which the sun followed its daily course without

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¹ *Rg Veda*, IV. 23. 9–11. The present study uses the English translation of H.H. Wilson, *Rig-Veda Sanhita* 7 Vols. (New Delhi, India: Cosmo Publications, reprinted 1977). This was originally published between 1857–1888.
ever faltering must have suggested the idea of a cosmic order or system according to which things in nature move and function. The Indo-Aryans also introduced the concept of *Yajna* (Fire sacrifice), which relates to the concept of *Rta* in its later development. The concept of *Yajna* was developed for the purpose of encouraging fire sacrifice as offering to the gods who were responsible for maintaining the cosmic order.³ This connection between cosmic order and sacrifice or ritual in a broader sense was crucial to the Vedic religion, as we will see later. Finally, it is also of interest that the concept of *Rta* disappears from use after the Vedic period and is replaced by the concept of *Dharma*.

The fuller meaning and import of the term *Rta* is in the nexus of its three-fold dimensions — cosmological, ethical and ritual. These three aspects are treated separately here for the sake of convenience in getting a handle on a complex and rich idea. It would be erroneous to take these aspects as mutually exclusive.

**Cosmological:** Many references in the Rg Veda speak of *Rta*’s influence throughout the universe. *Rta* is compared to a spoked wheel revolving round the sky (I. 164. 11). Dawn, the daughter of heaven, meticulously follows the path of *Rta* (I. 124. 3). The sun is described as the bright and lovely face of *Rta* (VI. 51. 1). The rivers follow the *Rta* of Varuṇa (I. 105. 12; II. 28. 4). Heaven and earth are what they are by reason of *Rta* (X. 121. 1). At one point heaven and earth are called the ancient parents of *Rta* (VI. 17. 7). Some of the Vedic deities are mentioned in close connection with *Rta*. Chief among them are Mitra and Varuṇa who rule over all the world by *Rta* (V. 63. 7). They are guardians of *Rta* (VII. 64. 2). They strengthen and cherish *Rta* (V. 65. 2) and punish those who practice *Anrta* (VII. 60. 5; 61. 5). Varuṇa as Lord of the cosmic order has control of the waters (II. 28. 4; V. 5. 3–6).

Even though this is not an exhaustive cataloguing of the references, it is ample enough to give a sense of the cosmological dimension of *Rta*. In this sense, it refers to the organizing principle which enables the natural bodies of the universe to move according to an order, rhythm and balance. As S. Radhakrishnan says, “everything that is ordered in the universe has *Rta* for its principle.”⁴ It

³ Sinha, *Sovereignty*, p. V.